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School of Social Work and Family Studies

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Date December 1, 2001
Abstract

This study examined how group work can provide a culturally-competent, gender and age-sensitive model of social work practice with girls of colour. I developed and implemented a school-based girls’ group program specifically designed to outreach to girls of colour between thirteen and eighteen years of age. Results from the program demonstrated that through purposeful efforts to develop collaborative, non-hierarchical relationships, adult facilitators played a significant role in creating an environment in which girls could speak about issues that were important to them, including those related to race and culture.

During the group sessions, girls learned about each other and themselves, identified similarities in their experiences as immigrants to Canada, and created a sense of group belonging. Similarity in non-dominant cultural status and gender among participants and facilitators appeared to have contributed to the group’s cohesiveness and countered structural barriers to addressing race and culture. This study highlighted the value of a group model of practice to provide girls of colour with their own space to freely explore individual experiences and a vehicle for community organizing.
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CHAPTER I: Introduction

When all scientific activity is recognized as producing knowledge for a purpose, then a researcher's acknowledgement of the political purposes of the work is a strength (Swigonski, 1993, pp. 181).

I remember a story my mother told about me as a young child. Our next door neighbours were good friends, with the three children being close in age to my brother and me. We would go in and out of each other's homes like they were one of the same. One day, I had run home to change into my bathing suit, exclaiming to my own mother that I would be joining our neighbour who was lying out in the sun. My mother asked why I would want to do that. With great excitement, I declared that because our neighbour's skin was getting darker the longer she remained in the sun, it only made sense that my own skin would in fact become lighter if I was also to stay in the sun. While it may be unfair to reflect back as an adult to interpret the logic of my reasoning, several questions arise for me from this scenario. Did my reasoning indicate a desire to be white? Did I view myself as opposite to my neighbour? While I cannot answer these questions for certain, I can confidently assume that as a young girl of colour, I was trying to make sense of my world by contemplating a variety of complex issues related to colour, race and culture.

Many young women of colour emerging from their adolescent years into adulthood have written about the dilemmas and issues related to growing up as a girl of colour in Canada. For example, Yee (1993), a Chinese Canadian writer, reflects on her identity crisis through the teen years, describing the dilemma she experienced by knowing that she "will never be really ‘Canadian’...yet will never know China, of being Chinese, from the inside (p. 3). Other women speak of the name calling on the school grounds and the discrimination in employment opportunities (for example, Mukherjee, 1993). While
each voice reflects its own complexity and uniqueness shaped by a multitude of intersecting factors including gender, age, race and culture, the experiences of girls of colour in Canada, including my own, are inextricably linked by a shared historical context.

Canadian history is characterized by both rich diversity as well as enduring discrimination. Aboriginal communities and people of colour have always had a presence in Canada. For example, Canadians of African descent have a recorded presence since 1605 when Mattieu da Costa was acknowledged as an interpreter working with Champlain (Kelly, 1999, p. 30). A large community of free Black United Empire Loyalists settled in Nova Scotia after the American Revolution, and between 1815-1860, forty to sixty thousand fugitive slaves and free people of colour sought refuge in Ontario. As early as 1858 when gold was discovered in British Columbia, Asians arrived in Canada (Ward, 1990). The Chinese were the first Asians to take advantage of job opportunities available in Canada, and the Japanese and East Indians soon followed.

Canadian policies towards Aboriginal communities and people of colour have often been discriminatory and exclusionary. In the years following Confederation, the Canadian government passed legislation to dominate and control Aboriginal communities. It passed the Indian Act which allowed government to define who was an Indian and set in motion a series of restrictions on their lives, such as limiting the movement of people and ownership of land and forbidding large gatherings or meetings. Such restrictions have been described as “the blueprint for apartheid” (Bedassigae-Pheasant, 1996, p. 79). The Canadian government acted early to restrict immigration to “preferred” immigrants despite its goal to populate the country, particularly the Western provinces, with new immigrants. This meant that the Anglo-Saxon, Northern or Western European was the
preferred stock of immigrant, while those from Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean were not favoured. It was believed that individuals from the latter groups could not conform with the British nature of Canadian society, would only undermine the British identity of Canada and “retard the development of the country” (Ferguson, 1975, p. 51). At the turn of the century, William Mackenzie King, Deputy Minister of Labour, asserted that “Canada should desire to restrict immigration from the Orient” and “that Canada should remain a white man’s country” not only for economic and social but political and national reasons (Ferguson, p. 1). Accordingly, Canada curtailed immigration from Asia with numerous head taxes and restrictive legislation such as the Continuous Journey regulation which limited immigration from India with strict travel guidelines and the Gentleman’s Agreement which imposed head taxes on travel from Japan. These restrictions were justified by a philosophy that the climate and culture of Canada made Asians unfit to work. The exclusionary policies characterizing the first half of the century were again revealed during Hitler’s onslaught against the Jews in Europe when Canada accepted merely 4,000 Jews, compared to Mexico’s 20,000 and the United States’ 240,000 (Granatstein, Abella, Acheson, Bercuson, Brown & Neatby, 1990, p. 369).

The civil rights movement, as well as a larger international movement which criticized white domination in Africa and South East Asia, finally forced Canadians to examine the discrimination inherent in official policy. Responding in part to such criticisms, in 1967 the points system was introduced, with the goal that immigrant applicants be evaluated according to their age, skills, education and employability rather than race (Marr & Siklos, 1995). Finally, the immigration doors began to open to traditionally “non-preferred” areas such as the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East.
and Asia. The Immigration Act of 1976 and subsequently the Immigration Act of 1978 maintained that “immigrants would be scrutinized for their labour market impact” rather than ethnic origins (Marr & Siklos, p. 298). Aboriginal communities, including the National Indian Brotherhood, participated in a variety of activities to counter mainstream efforts to assimilate them and create a movement to reclaim an indigenous identity. In particular, communities organized towards local control of education, reaffirming the validity of their culture and language, spirituality, music and arts (Mount Pleasant-Jette, 1996).

Despite a history of discrimination, ethnocultural diversity has become an integral component of Canada’s national identity as well as its international reputation since the 1980’s. The value of cultural and racial pluralism was entrenched in the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In 1988, the federal Multiculturalism Act reaffirmed a policy which promoted the freedom of all to “preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage” (Berry & Laponce, 1994, p. 8). This legislation identified multiculturalism as “a fundamental characteristic of Canadian heritage and identity” and encouraged Canadian institutions to be “both respectful and inclusive of Canada’s multicultural character” (Berry & Laponce, p. 8). However, despite establishing an official ideology of multiculturalism, there is enduring ambivalence towards plurality through both systemic and individual discrimination. This has been demonstrated through a variety of social research, including a few studies that document the experiences of girls of colour.

Overview of Canadian Studies

Although somewhat limited, the existing research involving girls from communities of colour in Canada highlights both the subtle and overt impact that
Canada’s history of ethnocentrism and racism continues to have on the lives of girls. The research by Handa (1997), Kelly (1999) and Mogg (1991) suggests that girls of colour may be subjected to a process of racialization by the dominant culture, rendering them vulnerable to isolation. The concept of racialization is described as a “process whereby meanings are attributed to certain patterns of physical variation” (Kelly, 1999, p. 28). Through racialization, the meanings of race and identity become linked so that collective identities, such as that of girls of colour, become socially constructed. According to Miles (1988),

within this process of racialization, the ideology of racism plays a central role by offering criteria upon which signification can occur, attributing negative correlates to all those possessing the real or alleged criteria, and legitimating consequent discriminatory behaviour or consequences (p. 9).

For girls of colour, social meanings, typically negative, may be ascribed to them due to their race, culture or ethnicity which result in them being labelled as different from and not belonging within the dominant culture. “White” is typically the term used to describe the communities which comprise the dominant group in Canada. “White” is a social colour, and there are many different people who are White but who face discrimination based on class, origin, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, language, physical or mental disabilities, sexual orientation or geographic origin (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, & Thomas, 1991). For girls of colour, the consequences of being perceived or treated as outside of the dominant culture could be many, such as feeling excluded by peers or misunderstood by teachers. Isolation can be causally related to a range of outcomes, from poor grades to suicide.

The studies of Handa (1997), Kelly (1999) and Mogg (1991) differ from each other by data gathering method, geography and community of focus. Handa (1997) explored the experiences of South Asian girls from the Metropolitan Toronto area,
conducted fourteen interviews with girls between fifteen and nineteen years of age. The girls she interviewed were from a broad range of classes and religions and all with parents who had arrived in Canada between 1970 and 1985 from East Africa, Pakistan, India or the Middle East. Kelly (1999) conducted school-based focus groups with twenty-six girls and twenty-three boys from Black communities in Edmonton. All the girls were between fifteen and twenty years of age, with many having immigrated to Canada during their junior high school years and most from parents born in the Caribbean. Mogg (1991) examined the experiences of bicultural conflict of twenty-two Vietnamese adolescent girls between twelve and nineteen years of age in Greater Vancouver by utilizing a question guide. Despite differences in research design, common themes can be found in the three studies which describe the similar ways the dominant culture, including its norms, school system, media and policies, contribute to a racialized identity among girls of colour. These themes relate to ambivalent Canadian identity, the role of parents, and the role of mainstream services.

Ambivalent Canadian identity. The studies revealed ambivalence as to what being Canadian means and the degree to which girls viewed themselves as Canadian. In Mogg's study with Vietnamese girls in Vancouver, she found that eight of the twenty-eight girls identified themselves as "Canadian," primarily representing those girls who arrived at an early age. Seven of the girls wished to be "more Canadian" while four stated that they want to be "fully Canadian" (Mogg, 1991, p. 133). Mogg noted the girls' preference for the modernity that Canada appeared to offer, particularly with regard to the availability and variety of consumer goods. Some of Mogg's research participants shared that they disliked being Vietnamese and "wished they could be Canadian in every way" (p. 134). Several expressed concern about body image, making derogatory references to their skin
In Kelly’s study of the experiences of Black students in Edmonton, girls reported disillusionment with and alienation from a multicultural Canadian identity. One of Kelly’s participants stated, “this multiculturalism thing they have in Canada is a complete joke. They (whites) don’t believe in that!” (p. 80). The girls described an identity that was distinct from Canadian culture. As opposed to some of the girls in Mogg’s study who wanted to be more Canadian, the girls interviewed by Kelly described efforts to preserve a distinct Black identity. They highlighted the role their peers played in monitoring their behaviours, particularly in relation to cross-cultural relationships, so that their sense of Black identity would not diminished. For example, they described how other Black students would refer to each other as a “sell-out”, “white-washed” or an “oreo” for dating a white person.

Handa’s findings indicated that girls received mixed messages about what “Canadian” means in that "you can be different but not too different from the dominant culture(s)" (p. 201). For example, Handa found that girls tended to name inappropriate or "bad" behaviours as "white", essentially representing unfeminine behaviour in the South Asian context as "whiteness". She asserted that for the girls she talked with, ethnic identity depended on compliance with restrictions around femininity in that violating the norms of culture simultaneously destabilizes one’s identity as a female. Following this reasoning, for a girl to assume a Canadian identity, she would need to partake in “white” behaviour, thereby comprising her South Asian identity.
The role of parents. In Mogg's study, most of the Vietnamese girls interviewed focused on independence and freedoms that they felt their Canadian peers had and described the role their parents played in mediating their participation in the dominant culture. Most reported difficulty in participating in extracurricular activities with peers due to parental disapproval, domestic responsibilities, and conflicting responsibilities of part-time work.

Parental pressures in relation to academic achievement were reported as high and sustained by Vietnamese girls (Mogg, p. 90). Many girls expressed fears in not meeting the expectations of their parents, with those who were not meeting academic expectations of parents experiencing feelings of failure and frustrations in competing with their peers. All twelve Vietnamese girls between fourteen and nineteen reported parental expectations that they delay dating because it would be disruptive to their studies, parents wanting a say in who they date, and parents expecting marriage to be the outcome of their first dating experience. Several of the participants referred to how their parents limited their ability to be "Canadian", referring to limits on social activities. At the same time, some girls reported that their mother indirectly accommodated their daughter's gravitation towards aspects of the dominant culture.

In Handa's study, all of the South Asian girls interviewed named conflict with parents as the most significant issue affecting them, focusing on issues of freedom and autonomy as related to participation in the dominant culture. They emphasized the severity of family and community restrictions in relation to dating, choice of partner, vocation and freedom of movement, and they all placed significance on what they perceived to be lack of freedom or control over their own lives. All the girls interviewed indicated that most of the conflicts with their parents revolved around participating in social activities. Handa
found that lying was used as an important coping strategy to negotiate freedoms and maintain a good girl image. All of the girls in Handa’s study emphasized the need for secrecy, highlighting that family and community approval of behaviour was extremely consequential and could result in social ostracism. The girls expressed the need for secrets in order to maintain the "expected" role in relation to parents and community as well as to keep parental expectations hidden from their peers.

The role of mainstream services. Many of the South Asian girls interviewed by Handa felt misunderstood by support services offered by schools and social agencies and expressed fear of exclusion and judgment by family and their community if they sought outside support. For example, Handa (1997) related the story of one girl who disclosed sexual abuse by a family member. The school intervened, and she reported that her life changed for the worse, as she felt that her parents viewed her as sexually suspect and blamed her for the abuse. This young woman learned not to reach out for help within and outside the family, and chose to deal with the effects of the abuse and the intervention on her own.

Similarly, another girl spoke with a guidance counsellor about conflicts at home (Handa, 1997). Not taking into account that allegiance to home and family are central component of the identities of “acceptable” daughters within her culture, she was advised to leave home by the counsellor. The girl stated that this made her realize the ineffectiveness of the adult systems of support. In general, Handa found that many of the South Asian girls she interviewed felt that they had few people to turn to for guidance, concluding that many were attempting to sort out “extremely critical issues” on their own.

Kelly’s (1999) study emphasizes the role that schools play in the socialization of girls as well as in the development of their sense of belonging. Black girls criticized the
curriculum for objectifying, homogenizing and omitting Black people and their history. They described the stereotypes they faced with regards to high athletic ability, low academic potential and general propensity towards deviant behaviours from the adults whose role was to support their learning and well-being. They described their experiences of racial taunting and violence at school and identified how their resistance to norms [white norms] results in labels of deviance. Several girls described inadequate responses or inaction on the part of teachers in dealing with such altercations. Kelly’s study reiterates difficulties for girls of colour to access support from services within the dominant culture. Moreover, her findings suggest that despite efforts by professionals to minimize differences among students, an adolescent’s race and culture indeed affect her experience of isolation.

The findings of Kelly, Mogg, and Handa lay a strong foundation to suggest that girls of colour may experience isolation as they are “othered” by a widely held, exclusionary understanding of Canadian identity promoted through the dominant culture, including its school system and multicultural policies. Clearly, the consequences of isolation and "othering" are significant, reinforced by the findings of the Working Group on Girls, formed at the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, that immigrant and refugee girls are particularly vulnerable to violence as a result of "...dislocation and discrimination by the host communities, conflict with Western values and loss of economic and social power by the male heads of household" (Friedman, 1995, p. 15). The murder of Reena Virk, a girl of South Asian origin, in Victoria, British Columbia further demonstrates how racialization can contribute to a girl's vulnerability and marginality, resulting in the most fatal consequences (Batacharya, 1999; Jiwani, 1999).
The studies further suggest that the needs of girls of colour are not adequately met by mainstream services offered by schools and other social service agencies. Popular culture, including film, magazines, music, newspapers, and television are important forms of representations and significantly impact how mainstream culture establishes ideological frameworks to understand, interpret and represent racial differences (Kelly, 1998). Handa highlights how the media contribute to the construction of a commonly held understanding of the identity of South Asian girls in Canada. Through a media analysis of major newspapers in Canada, she concluded that the South Asian girls are measured and portrayed against a standard of "Canadian", which reflects the experiences of white girls as the norm. Alternatively, South Asian girls are portrayed as leading repressed lives, with their family culture as the only source of constraint and conflict. Such portrayals contribute to racialization of girls of colour, helping to hide the reality of racism as well as minimize the complexities of the girls' experiences and identities. It is often these media portrayals that shape the perceptions, biases and understandings of adults who provide services to girls, thereby shaping the development, implementation and evaluation of programs for girls.

Many of the girls in the studies could not identify adult support systems that they could rely on. In Mogg's study, several girls having difficulty in school reported that they were neither seeking support from family nor confiding in friends. A nineteen year old shared, "sometimes I find it very stressful and can hardly cope but what can I do?" (p. 69). Some girls in Handa's study stated that they were able to maintain an active social life by keeping secrets from the adults in their lives. The secrecy often meant that they were living in fear of being "discovered", leaving them susceptible to conflict and violence. Moreover, girls' disclosures to adults within the mainstream social service system did not
necessarily result in meaningful assistance. The narratives of the girls in Kelly’s study suggest inadequate social support for their education or well-being. Caught between ineffective white peer support, mainstream social service agencies, school assistance as well as limited availability of parental guidance, many girls in the studies lack adult supports within or outside of their cultural community.

Purpose of this Study

Preliminary review of current Canadian research, reinforced by the various autobiographical accounts by women of colour, provided the impetus for this study. Based on this review, I put forth that (1) girls of colour may be vulnerable to isolation due to a process of racialization as well as the intersecting impact of factors related but not limited to gender and age, (2) there are limited services that girls of colour can access safely or that facilitate meaningful discussions about race or culture, and (3) there is a lack of knowledge about how adults can support or assist girls of colour in ways that are culturally-competent. The primary purpose of this study is address these gaps in knowledge and services by exploring the effectiveness of group work designed specifically to engage girls of colour.

Theoretical Underpinnings

In the spirit of feminist standpoint and Paulo Freire's (1995) problem-posing learning theories, I have attempted to unify processes of research, practice and action to address the question, “how is a girls’ group model effective in engaging girls of colour?” I will begin by moving from Handa, Kelly and Mogg’s studies of individual experiences to a review of theory and research related to female adolescent development, bicultural socialization and social work group practice. This review will conclude that current
conceptualizations of adolescent development do not fully recognize the impact of race and culture, and the effectiveness of services based on such traditional paradigms is limited. At the same time, this review will highlight the potential effectiveness of group work in addressing a broader range of girls’ developmental needs by facilitating meaningful discussions about issues related to race and culture.

I approached this research by framing the experiences of girls of colour in the context set forth by structural social work theory (Mullaly, 1993). Structural social work calls upon social workers to uncover how social structures contribute to problems found in the day to day. With regard to the research design and methodology, I drew upon feminist standpoint (Swigonski, 1993), Paulo Freire’s (1970) problem-posing learning and participatory action theories (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992) which emphasize that individual consciousness can be developed via critical consciousness. These theories emphasize that research and education must begin with each girl’s own historicity, views and sense of reality, and that the relationship between the researcher and group participants must be based on collaboration. I set out to engage girls in a process in which we would together create the conditions for the unveiling of reality and develop power to critically perceive the world in which we find ourselves.

To this end, I developed and implemented the Girls’ Group Project at an inner city secondary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. The group sessions were open to girls of colour who were identified as female adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 years, including all girls “who are not seen as White by the dominant culture” (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, & Thomas, 1991). This understanding of girls of colour includes Black, Aboriginal, Chinese, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Filipino, and Latin American Canadians. The primary sources of data included written work sheets and art work by
girls, note-taking by the group facilitators and tape-recording of key discussions.

Although the study had the type of goals related to grounded theory, that is to learn how group work can engage girls of colour, the methodology and processes of data analysis were based on the general approaches of participatory action research theory.

As highlighted by Swigonski (1993), all scientific knowledge and research is socially situated, with our own values, beliefs and experiences shaping not only the identification of the area of study but also the design, implementation and conclusions of the project. Participants in the Girls’ Group Project were asked to provide their own perceptions; therefore, conclusions were conditional upon personally held meanings among a specific group of girls. In addition, I acknowledge that as a woman of colour, my own experiences as a girl significantly shaped my motivation to conduct the present study and likely affected the study’s results. At the same time, I assert that these factors which may appear to be limiting are also the strengths of the study. I explain this further during a discussion of validity in Chapter 3: Methodology & Design.

Delimitations

With regards to the generalizability of the study’s findings, this study is bound by the nature of the research being explored as well as the girls participating in the Project. Although the intention of the study was to recruit girls from a broad range of communities of colour, the majority of girls who participated in the study were first generation immigrants from a variety of Asian cultures.

Significance

The findings add to the existing literature about the lives of girls in Canada by providing greater understanding of the complexities and intersecting factors impacting their development. Moreover, this research provides insight into how social work group
practice with girls of colour can support individual development as well as facilitate community building in ways that are culturally competent.
CHAPTER II: Conceptual Context

There are several areas of existing research and theory related to adolescent development, bicultural socialization, structural social work, and group work across diversity which informed this study.

Adolescent Development Theory

Research related to adolescent development suggests that adolescence is a time of marked change for girls. It is a time when they are "caught in the middle", so to speak, neither enjoying the freedoms of childhood nor bound to the responsibilities of adulthood. Preoccupied with an exploration of self, it is a time of experimenting with multiple identities, such as those related to gender, sexual orientation, politics, career, religion, race and ethnicity. Developing such affiliations may appear to be an ever-changing, chaotic process during adolescence, as physical and emotional changes intersect and feelings fluctuate. As stated by Brooks-Gunn and Graber (1999),

While other epochs of the life course also require that identities be revised or acquired, adolescence is sometimes considered unique in part because of the multiple arenas in which change is occurring, the press for more adult-like behavior, the rapid growth of cognitive skills, the more sustained interactions with same-age peers, and the physical growth (p. 155).

The process of forming an identity and sense of self is an integral task in adolescence and can substantially impact the healthy development and empowerment of adolescent girls.

Theories of adolescent development, including identity formation, have been substantially influenced and shaped by the research of Erik Erikson (1964). Erikson outlines an eight-stage theory of psychosocial development. The first stage, characterized by a relational crisis in developing trust versus mistrust, highlights the importance of developing safe and trusting relationships. However, the seven following stages are characterized by increasing individuation. Within Erikson’s theory, healthy development
relates to successful resolution of stage-related crises, with each stage resulting in increased separation from others and greater independence. Healthy movement through the stages is dependent on individual functioning.

The stage most connected to adolescent development is the fifth stage, identity versus confusion, which is rooted in the resolution of adolescent identity crisis. According to Erikson, this is the “psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult” (p. 263). In relation to health, he suggests that role confusion can result in “delinquent and downright psychotic episodes”, which, if not diagnosed and treated correctly, will have a long-lasting, disturbing impact on young people (p. 262). Specific to girls, Erikson asserted that “the fear of remaining empty (oral) or being emptied (anal) has a special quality in girls, since the body image of girls includes a valuable inside, an inside on which depends her fulfillment as an organism, a person, and as a role bearer” (p. 410).

Erikson recognized the increasingly negative impact that industrialization has on the identity development of youth; however, he identified “systematic introspection” as the primary form of intervention.

Feminist research has questioned the universality of theory, specifically critiquing Erikson’s definitions of healthy adolescent development. Psychologist Carol Gilligan (1993) has articulated a powerful feminist critique of Erikson’s theory based on her own research with women. She argued that his theory of development was based on the experience of white, middle-class males, and therefore, that his indicators of healthy development do not accurately describe the experiences of women. Specifically, she criticized Erikson’s emphasis on separation as the primary goal of development. In her own research, she found that women tend to speak in terms of relationship and
connectedness as opposed to separation. She argued that women engage in psychological process to resist separations, and that “identity is defined in the context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care” (Gilligan, 1993, p. 160). Because Erikson’s theory does not acknowledge connectedness as a value but rather views it as an impediment to development, women’s relational way of being “becomes by definition a failure to develop” (Gilligan, p. 8). Thus, Gilligan determined that what was really a problem in theory had become identified as a female developmental problem.

Specific to Erikson’s view of adolescent development, Gilligan highlighted that “the deviance of female development has been especially marked in the adolescent years when girls appear to confuse identity with intimacy by defining themselves through relationship with others” (Gilligan, p. 170). Girls may be labelled as “difficult” because of their resistance to separate and their determination to stay in relationship. The health and well-being of girls further suffer as they struggle to fit the images of prescribed relationships and models of goodness. To Gilligan, mental health and well-being related to staying in relationship and in connection with oneself, with others and with the world. Thus, problems in identity development through adolescence are viewed not only as intra-psychic flaws but as relational crises.

Psychologist Mary Pipher (1994) specifically questioned Erikson’s claim that fear of being left empty or simply being left are indeed the most basic and innate of feminine fears (Erikson, 1964). She suggested that certain themes, including weight, fear of rejection, and need for protection, seem to be rooted in the dominant culture’s expectations for women rather than in the pathology of an individual girl. Rather than pointing the finger at the individual or the family, she views mainstream culture,
specifically the media, as the primary factor in negatively impacting adolescent girls’ health and well-being.

Pipher views the healthy development of adolescent girls in terms of identity, specifically the formation of true and false selves. She argues that girls face enormous pressures to split into false selves, and “the culture is what causes girls to abandon their true selves and take up false selves” (Pipher, 1994, p. 37). She cites a study by Broverman who asked women and men to check off adjectives describing the healthy development of men, women and adults. While healthy women are described as passive, illogical and dependent, healthy adults were described as “active, independent and logical” (p. 39). To Pipher, girls have “long been trained to be feminine at considerable cost to their humanity…evaluated on basis of appearance and caught in myriad double binds” (p. 44).

Although feminist critiques address the gender bias in traditional theories of adolescent development, much of feminist theory itself has failed to consider the impact of other variables of oppression, including race and culture, on female adolescent development. For example, according to Pipher, through adolescent development, parents have limited influence on their daughters: “As daughters move into the broader culture, they care what their friends, not their parents, think. They model themselves after media stars, not parental ideals” (p. 38). This is likely true for many adolescent girls yet may not speak to experiences of all adolescent girls whose identities are being shaped by alternative influences related to their ethnospecific culture and race.

Theorists such as bell hooks (1981) put forth that feminist theory and action has evoked an image of women as a collective group, minimizing the fact that young women of colour experience very different realities rooted not only in sexism but racism. Thus,
according to hooks, members of the dominant race have interpreted feminism, including its research, theory and practice, in ways not relevant to all girls and women. Specific to the experiences of girls of colour, psychologists and researchers, including Marguerite Wright (1998) and Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997), asserted that the developmental experiences of girls of colour in relation to identity formation vary from how typical identity theory, including developmental and feminist theory, describe the experience. Wright agreed that adolescence is indeed a time of identity exploration; however, she suggested that “issues relating to racial identity take centre stage” (Wright, 1998, p. 218).

According to Wright, by adolescence, girls of colour begin to identify themselves by their race, a significant shift from childhood when gender identification is paramount (Wright, 1998). This awareness of race as a defining feature of identity is a “crucial turning point in a teenager’s development” (Wright, p. 221). Wright observes that skin colour alone results in youth carrying a heavy burden of stereotypes made by the dominant society regarding their intelligence, values, abilities, trustworthiness, attitudes and future. The experiences of girls of colour are simply different from those of girls of the dominant culture, not only with regard to how they relate to the expectations of their cultural peer group, their parents, their family’s culture but also with regard to the messages they receive from the mainstream media’s expectations of them and their cultural group.

Similarly, Tatum (1997) suggests that issues related to race and ethnicity become important to a girl’s concept of self. She states that youth of colour will indeed think of themselves in terms of race as they become more aware that it is within this context that the rest of the world views them. She identifies the role that media plays in sending out messages regarding race and thus in shaping an adolescent’s own sense of identity. There
are strong societal messages about which girl is or is not desirable, which significantly impact on the self-identity, feelings of self-worth and ultimately the overall health of adolescent girls of colour. A study by Dukes and Martinez (1994) similarly highlight the role that institutions such as the school system play in shaping the self-esteem of girls of colour. Implementing Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale among 18,612 students in Colorado, the authors found that institutional racism resulted in schools being more coercive with students of colour, which in turn resulted in their lower public self-esteem.

According to Tatum, for young women of colour, "resisting the stereotypes and affirming other definitions of themselves" is an important developmental task (p. 55). In her analysis, acquiring a healthy identity relates to achieving an internal sense of personal security as well as having the awareness, skills and ability to acknowledge the reality of racism and being able to respond effectively to it.

The Concept of Biculturalism

As identified by Tatum and Wright, traditional theories of adolescent development have provided a limited framework to understand the experiences of adolescent girls of colour with regard to cultural, racial and ethnic identity. The concept of biculturalism presents an alternative approach to understanding the complex influences and process by which adolescent girls of colour negotiate often conflicting messages in order to define self. This model describes a dual socialization process in which individuals are socialized by their own cultural group as well as by forces within the dominant culture.

Valentine (1971) formulated a bicultural model as an alternative to theories that either emphasized assimilation of minority cultures to the dominant culture or the distinctiveness of minority cultures from the dominant culture. As stated by Valentine, in addition to being socialized into their own cultural group,
Members of all subgroups are thoroughly enculturated in dominant culture patterns by mainstream institutions, including most of the content of mass media, most products and advertising for mass marketing, the entire system of public schooling, constant exposure to national fashions, holidays and heroes (Valentine, 1971, p. 143).

The bicultural model was developed to take into account individuals who are socialized within a distinct cultural context but who can function successfully within the norms and institutions of majority culture (de Anda, 1984; Lukes & Land, 1990; Valentine; 1971).

Based on the concept of dual socialization, many theories of identity formation emerged which described a series of conflicts to be resolved before the individual is able to reach the next stage of bicultural identity formation, similar to Erikson's stage theory of adolescent development. For example, Atkinson, Morten and Sue (1983) outlined a five-stage model involving (1) conformity, when there is preference for the values of the dominant culture, (2) dissonance, when there is confusion and conflict regarding one's own cultural system and the dominant culture's system, (3) resistance and immersion, when there is active rejection of the dominant system and acceptance of one's own cultural system's traditions, (4) introspection, when there is questioning and reflection of both cultures, and (5) synergistic articulation and awareness, when there is a resolution of conflicts from the previous stages and development of an identity incorporating elements from both the dominant and one's own cultural system.

More recently, social work practitioners and theorists have questioned the validity of stage theories of bicultural socialization. Primary criticisms related to how such conceptualizations represent bicultural identity formation as a discrete, cumulative, and unidirectional process which results in a fixed and final outcome, as opposed to a recursive and on-going process (Lukes & Land, 1990; Yeh & Huang). These criticisms suggested that stage theories fail to recognize the malleability of identity within its social context or the many identities or range of ways to express one's identity (Yeh & Huang,
As well, critics suggested that stage theories imply that progression through stages is highly valued; however, this may be a goal that some do not value or are not able to achieve (Yeh & Huang, 1996; Gomez, 1994). As well, stage theories have been criticized for not explaining the factors, including timing and negotiation, which would contribute to progression to the next stage or for not acknowledging the possibility of an individual being at more than one stage at a time (Helm, 1986; Lukes and Land, 1990; Jones, 1990). Finally, critics suggested that stage theories do not acknowledge the role of dominant society in continuing the cycle of racism, placing the blame of racism on the victim and suggesting that changes must occur in the ethnic group rather than the dominant group's attitudes and behaviors (Helm, 1986; Jones, 1990).

Yeh and Huang's (1996) research with Asian-American college students supported such criticisms, concluding that stage theories offer limited and simplistic explanations to complex and dynamic processes. Their study involved 78 middle-class students in California. The authors asked the question "how do Asian American adolescents conceptualize ethnic identity both visually and verbally, and which factors do they identify as influential in the development of their ethnic identity?" They implemented a variety of measures including ethnic identity development exercises, open-ended questions and demographic profiles to gather data about individual processes of identity development. Their findings supported a model of ethnic identity formation in which an individual's attitudes and behaviours about identity continually change and develop as issues in one's ethnic group and the dominant culture are encountered. They found that current stage models of identity development are inappropriate for Asian-American students who, as a majority, described the process as dynamic and complex.
The students in the study identified several factors which impacted their socialization and sense of identity. Consistent with the body of literature on Asian cultures, collectivism was an important factor as was the presence or absence of other Asians, highlighting the impact of social context and external forces in shaping identity. Many subjects reported that ethnic identity was forced upon them by others, despite theories that suggest choice in selecting identity. Shame was identified by 40% of respondents as an important factor in influencing their socialization despite theories that emphasize internal anger and resentment towards the dominant culture. In this study, only 6% of the sample identified anger as a motivating force. The researchers concluded that current theories of identity formation and socialization do not recognize the roles of external forces, relationships and context which are particularly important for a culture that emphasizes interdependence. They suggested that stage theories have not been created with consideration of specific minority groups; therefore, they do not capture the uniqueness and complexity of individual cultures nor individual experiences that are impacted by diverse variables including gender, age, and generation (Lukes & Land, 1990; Yeh & Huang, 1996).

Despite the limitations of stage theories, emerging research, including that of Gomez (1990) supported that the concept of biculturalism itself is important to understand and explore in working with diverse populations. Gomez's study involved 151 Cuban-American citizens 18 years or older from New Jersey and aimed to determine whether subjective mental health is related to an ethnic member's degree of biculturalism. Biculturalism was measured by using an adaptation of the biculturalism scale of the Latino Bicultural Assessment Questionnaire. The questionnaire measured three factors selected from a review of previous studies on acculturation: language use and preference,
ethnic identity and cultural contact and ethnic social interaction. The results of the study showed a positive relationship between biculturalism and self-esteem, suggesting that the more bicultural the Cuban-American subjects were, the higher their psychological well-being. Gomez applied these findings to define psychological adjustment as both adaptation to the majority culture and retention of the ethnic culture. Gomez concluded that any assessment of a client is incomplete without an evaluation of his/her level of biculturalism and that "a culturally sensitive mental health service that supports the establishment and development of biculturalism is better equipped to help those with mental health problems a service that neglects the bicultural dimension" (p. 386).

**Structural Social Work**

Gaps in theory and narrow definitions of adolescent development have resulted in practice with adolescent girls which neglects the impact of culture and race. Social work theory could potentially play a leading role in filling in such gaps. Mullaly (1993) noted that it may seem appealing to abandon theory as irrelevant and too abstract with regard to practice issues. Yet, he asserted that (1) theory is part of everyday life and (2) theoretical ignorance is "not a professional virtue but an excuse for sloppy and dishonest work" (p. 129). According to structural social work theory, inequality (1) is a natural, inherent (thus structural) component of capitalism, (2) falls along lines of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, disability and geographical region, (3) excludes whole groups from opportunities, meaningful participation in society and a satisfactory quality of life and (4) is self-perpetuating (Mullaly, 1993). Mullaly identifies the major source of social problems as being located in the way society is structured. Social change is difficult, as each level of the structure is interdependent and mutually reinforcing. A structural perspective suggests that regardless of specific racial and ethnic background, girls of
colour in Canada share a common experience in that they are raised simultaneously in multiple cultural systems which are often in conflict and they are subjected to a different set of socioeconomic realities than adolescents of the dominant culture.

In Moreau's description of structural social work, practice focuses on the intersections of forces creating a total system of oppression (Mullaly, 1993, p. 123). Such practice focuses not only on working with social institutions but with individuals, families, groups and communities, connecting the personal and political at all levels of practice. The goals of structural social work practice are to provide immediate relief from the negative effects of an exploitative and alienating social order and to affect longer term change by transforming the conditions and social structures that cause these negative effects (Mullaly, 1993). These goals are achieved through consciousness-raising to challenge the dominant ideology, utilizing social welfare institutions in ways to maximize their liberating features, and attending to our own lives and relationships.

Structural social work can be applied through therapeutic and helping relationships with individuals. For example, Berger and Kytle (1985) described a structural approach to traditional therapy, one in which the political dimensions of the relationship between the therapist and client are named and acknowledged. Others have addressed the need to critically examine the theories that guide work with individuals, particularly in terms of their cultural, class and gender biases (Bilides, 1991; Sue, 1977; Lum, 1982; Pinderhughes, 1984; Waxler-Morrison, Anderson, & Richardson, 1990). These authors highlighted the political dimensions of social work, emphasizing an analysis of power issues in any treatment or supportive relationship. They also assert the need for workers to increase their own understanding of their own cultural identity and to raise their
bicentral awareness through personal examinations of variables of oppression, including
race, culture, gender, etc.

Social Work Practice with Groups Across Diversity

Group work offers an approach to working with girls of colour that actively incorporates discussions related to bicentralism. According to Chau (1991), multiethnic groups can provide the "human laboratory for learning about cultural differences and facilitating intercultural understanding and skills" (p. 3). He viewed group work, including the planning, structure, leadership, content and procedures of the group, as a way to empower individuals to take a fresh look at themselves and their own place in the environment. In addition, multiethnic group work practice reflects our current reality with regard to population diversity. Studies by Simmons and Parsons (1983), Lewis and Ford (1991), and Bilides (1991) highlighted the potential of group work to deliver culturally-competent, gender-sensitive and age-appropriate services to girls of colour.

Simmons and Parsons (1983) described their research in developing age-appropriate groups for girls. They studied the outcomes of a small group workshop developed for Big Sisters of Colorado to complement the organization's traditional Life Choices Program. The small group workshops included eight to ten girls and one adult leader. The groups met weekly with the objective to increase the girls' self-esteem, develop awareness of future role alternatives and strengthen a sense of personal control or internality of life events. The researchers adopted an understanding of empowerment that suggests that successful empowerment would lead to stronger sense of personal control over life events and greater perceived competence to reach life goals, including career goals. The girls were recruited by school social workers and all were sixth graders. Three scale measures were used to test the effects of the workshops, including the
Multidimensional Measure of Children’s Perceptions of Control, Perceived Competence Scale for Children and career checklists.

The study findings indicated success in meeting objectives with working class girls: there was increased internality and perceived competence for school success, social relationships and general life events as well as increased knowledge of both traditional and non-traditional career alternatives. However, with regard to underclass adolescent girls, the authors found no increase in internalization or knowledge of career alternatives; in fact, they reported a significant decrease in perceived competence. To account for the differential outcomes, Simmons and Parsons hypothesized that the program likely reflected goals and perspectives that the working-class girls could identify with, while the other girls could not. It may be that the participants were not able to bridge the distance between their own lives and roles with the coping taught in the Life Choices Program; thus, the goals and means to achieve them were unfamiliar. Moreover, this disparity could have had a negative effect on the girls as they became aware of the discrepancies. The researchers asserted that it would be useful to explore more appropriate approaches for girls who do not benefit from current structures of the program and concluded that "the goals and strategies presented in such programs must be designed specifically for adolescents of different backgrounds if they are to result in empowerment of the participants" (Simmons and Parsons, 1983, p. 917). Such findings reinforce the need to explore alternative group structures for diverse populations, including girls of colour.

Lewis and Ford (1991) provided a model for ethnic and gender-sensitive group work practice with an empowerment focus in their work with women of colour. Their research described the implementation of the Network Utilization Project designed to empower African-American women by increasing their systematic use of social support networks to
resolve individual and community problems. The major assumption of the model is that people work most effectively when they are in groups they consider to be very similar to those of their natural environments.

The intervention included seven techniques, including focus on individual and community problems, focus on small groups, the group environment, weekly sessions and homework and focus on written and graphic instruments. To ensure a small group setting, a maximum of ten members were allowed to participate. Based on research that documents the importance of leader–participant similarity, the groups were facilitated by two African-American facilitators.

Lewis and Ford reported both outcome and group process findings. With regard to outcome measures, the gains made in measures of empowerment were significant. The group members’ ability to analyze community and individual problems, to find solutions within and outside the group, and to act on the new information to change their environments increased. With regard to process, the study’s findings highlighted the value of same-gender groups in providing a common lens in which to link participants’ experiences.

In addition, the authors found that biculturality was a primary theme characterizing the group participants' daily lives. They asserted that active exploration of participants’ experiences of interactions between the wider society and their own communities was essential for the group intervention to be relevant to the lives of participants. With regard to group leaders, they highlighted the importance of knowing about cultural and racial histories and racial dynamics, being well-acquainted with community norms and potential participants, and reinforcing individual and community attempts at empowerment.
Bilides (1991) examined issues of race, colour, ethnicity and class through the school-based Bracetti Group Work Program. The Program was implemented in Boston and served 700 culturally diverse adolescents boys and girls from grades six to eight, including Latino/Puerto Rican, Black, White, Asian, inner-city and low-income youth. The goal of the groups was to help students develop decision-making skills, combat social isolation, clarify values and cultural differences and promote constructive group behaviour and intercultural contact and interaction. They found that the groups became a microcosm of the struggles and prejudices played out in larger social contexts, reflecting the power structure of the school as well as colour hierarchy. The study provided strategies to address issues of race, colour, ethnicity and class in a way that facilitates the group process and supports the bicultural development of group members. With regard to group facilitation, Bilides found that adolescents need sensitive and self-aware group leaders who can relate in a warm and genuine way and can act in a multitude of roles such as a sounding board, information giver, educator, mediator, safety net, and role model. He asserted that the challenge is to create an environment that is safe and accepting and that helps teens to acquire enough confidence and understanding to be capable of moving freely between different cultures. Bilide's examination of the Bracetti Group Work Program highlighted the pivotal role of group leaders in creating a safe and supportive environment for adolescents to share their experiences, beliefs and values about diversity.

Summary

A review of the theory and research related to female adolescent development, bicultural socialization and social work practice with groups revealed important findings to incorporate in the present study. First, the work of Gilligan and Pipher demonstrated traditional development theory does not describe the experience of girls and that for girls,
adolescent development is linked to relationship and connection. Tatum and Wright further advanced the discussion about adolescent development, highlighting the need to pay close attention to how issues of race, culture and ethnicity impact girls’ sense of identity.

The concept of biculturalism provides social workers with a framework to better understand the experiences of individuals they are working with and thus design more relevant interventions and programs. The utility of the bicultural model is demonstrated by Gomez who linked well-being with biculturalism. Yeh and Huang cautioned that stage theories of identity formation are simplistic and that individual explorations of biculturalism are more often dynamic, recursive and shaped by experiences within the dominant and ethnospecific cultures.

With regard to practice, structural social work broadens understanding about the lives of girls by looking beyond the intrapsychic experience to consider how society’s structural inequalities impact their experiences. Structural social work practice with girls of colour calls for both immediate support with their day-to-day needs and longer term change through consciousness raising and skill development.

Finally, the research of Simmons and Parsons, Lewis and Ford, and Bilides provided models of group work with diverse populations. Simmons and Parsons found that the content and themes of the sessions must be adapted to fit with the socioeconomic and cultural realities of the girls participating in the groups. Lewis and Ford emphasized the importance of facilitator/participant similarity and found that the facilitators needed to be willing and prepared to address issues related to race and culture. Bilides found value in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue during school-based groups with adolescents. Like Lewis and Ford, he emphasized the important role that facilitators play in shaping the
group process and particularly highlighted that self-awareness on the part of the adult was critical. These studies reinforce the value of group opportunities to dialogue about the experience of growing up in two cultures and to develop problem-solving and coping skills within a bicultural context.

While there is ample research that examines the individual concepts of female adolescent development, biculturalism, structural social work, and group work, the literature does not adequately address the linkages between these four theoretical positions. For example, there are gaps related to understanding how the concept of biculturalism fits with the lives of girls, how group practice fits with the developmental needs of girls of colour, how structural social work theory applies to group work or how critical dialogue fits with the maturity of adolescents. This study aimed to move from theory to practice, merging key themes from these four areas of existing literature to learn about effective social work methods of practice with girls of colour.
CHAPTER III: Methodology

We must never merely discourse on the present situation, must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes and fears - programs which at times in fact increase the fears of the oppressed consciousness. It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their views and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their situation in the world (Freire, 1970, pp. 77).

In order to design a study which addressed how a girls’ group model can be effective in engaging girls of colour, I drew upon three theoretical frameworks, including standpoint theory, problem-posing learning theory and participatory action research theory. These theories informed the decision to implement a group model with girls of colour as well as shaped the purpose, structure and activities of the group sessions.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory guided the overall purpose of the present study to actively involve girls of colour to consider how their standpoints are shaped by their age, gender, race, colour, and language. Understanding one's own standpoint involves a level of conscious awareness about (1) one's location in the social structure which is shaped by gender, culture, colour, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, etc. and (2) that location's relationship to the person's lived experiences (Swigonski, 1993, p. 172). Standpoint theory emphasizes the ability of marginalized groups such as girls of colour to assume multiple views of society. Referring to marginalized groups, Swigonski comments, to survive, they must have knowledge, awareness and sensitivity of both the dominant group's view of society and their own - the potential for 'double vision' or consciousness - and thus the potential for a more complete view of social reality (p. 173).

The concept of 'double vision' is not intended to negate the serious adverse consequences of oppression but rather is a strategy that "all marginalized persons learn in the struggle to
create a safe and satisfying life" (Swigonski, p. 173). Swigonski suggests that although an individual is from a marginalized group, this does not mean that he/she has critical awareness. Individual standpoint can be developed via critical consciousness, which, according to Swigonski, is the primary goal of social work research guided by standpoint theory.

With regard to research, standpoint theory aims at understanding how social structures contribute to problems found in day to day life. As opposed to much social work research that "begins from the privileged perspective of those who control the social structure", research guided by feminist standpoint theory seeks to identify research problems within the daily realities of people from marginalized groups, whose life experiences have been ignored in scholarly work (Swigonski, p. 171). Standpoint theory challenges us to take such groups out of the margins and place their day-to-day realities in the centre of the research. Research based on standpoint theory seeks emancipatory transformation of the social structure. It aims to promote the development of programs and policies that seek to change institutional barriers; it is the opposite of positivistic approaches which define problems as individual differences.

**Problem-Posing Learning Theory**

The anti-oppression theory of Paulo Freire (1970) also guided the approach of the present study to engage girls in a critical reflection of their standpoint and to shape the relationship between myself and the girls. According to Freire, "to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects", and thus any efforts to educate or raise consciousness must begin with the transformation of the typical learning/helping relationship (Freire, 1970, p. 66). Freire describes "problem-posing learning" as education in which theory and practice begin with an individual's own historicity, views
and sense of reality. The relationship between teacher and student, or the social work practitioner and client/participant, is reframed as one in which collaborative dialogue results in a joint process of growth and learning. Within this relationship, the practitioner is not only teaching but also is being taught, "posing the problems in their relations with the world" (Freire, p. 60). In this model of practice, students or clients are no longer docile receivers of education, treatment or care, but rather become critical investigators in dialogue with the so-called "experts". The purpose of problem-posing education is to create together the conditions for the constant unveiling of reality and for people to "develop power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" (p. 63). Thus in problem-posing education, the social work practitioner and individual are both active participants in "unveiling reality, coming to know it critically and re-creating that knowledge" through involved, committed involvement (p. 51).

Participatory Action Research

Like standpoint and problem-posing theory, participatory action research focuses on "learning about how people actually experience a specific issue or problem" (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992, p. 9). This learning is then applied to determine what actions will make a practical difference to people’s lives and why, thereby promoting the development of strategies and programs based on real life experiences. What makes participatory action research unique is that participants are not viewed as passive subjects in a study but rather as active participants in shaping the process. The researcher and participants engage in joint learning by together identifying the focus of the research. Participatory action research recognizes that ‘action’ can happen throughout the research process, not just at the end or outcomes. In fact, the transformation of the research participants who
I understand their situation more clearly and are mobilized toward change can be conceived as action. Sohng (1995) identified the key methodological feature that distinguishes participatory research from other social research as dialogue. She stated,

Through dialogue, people come together and participate in all crucial aspects of investigation, educational and collective action. It is through talking to one another and doing things together that people get connected, and this connectedness leads to shared meaning (p. 8).

The research process itself is meant to strengthen and mobilize the research group by increasing understanding of the issues it is working on, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and building skills, confidence and knowledge.

**Rationale for Design**

Many research methods could have been selected in the design of this study, such as surveys of service providers working with girls or interviews with girls. These methods may also have provided an opportunity to learn about the lives of girls of colour and potentially successful methods of intervention. However, I determined that a weekly group program was an ideal model to engage in a dual process of research and action with girls whose voices are not adequately represented in scholarly work. An on-going group provided a research method that did not merely "examine" the needs of girls of colour but rather offered them an opportunity for spontaneous and collaborative learning. The group model merged the key principles of standpoint and problem-posing theories to create a research process that was 'action' in and of itself.

**Data Gathering Methods**

I implemented a variety of research tools to gather data during the planning, implementation and evaluation of the Girls’ Group Project, including focus groups, popular education techniques, worksheets and journals. I viewed each weekly girls’ group as a focus group. According to Barnsley and Ellis (1992), a focus group is a group of
people with similar experience who can discuss topics related to the research. The co-researchers highlighted that focus groups provide a way to interview a group of people at one time rather than individually. This method can be effective in learning about a group's perspective on an issue and allowing participants to compare experiences, as long as the topics are ones that people feel comfortable talking about in a group.

During the focus groups, I utilized popular education techniques such as drawing, collaging, and worksheets to gather data. Drawing and collaging encouraged participants to provide a visual expression of how they were affected by an issue or their life in the community. Barnsley and Ellis emphasized that this popular education technique can encourage discussion, allow people to see the relationships between various parts of their and each other's lives as well as make a documented record in a visual way. The worksheets were used to gather basic information, including demographic data, about the participants as well as more in-depth responses to the discussion topics.

I gathered additional data about the content and process of the Girls' Group Project by maintaining a journal. A journal is a day-to-day account of what is happening in relation to the research study, including debriefings after each session and any contacts with group participants. Barnsley and Ellis suggested that journals can provide understanding of how and why decisions were made about the research.

Methods of Analysis & Interpretation

My approach to analysis and interpretation drew upon participatory action research. With regard to participatory action research, Barnsley and Ellis (1992) described research analysis as the "process of bringing order to the data, and organizing what is there into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units" (p. 59). Interpretation relates to attaching a meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive
patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among the descriptions. The process of analysis and interpretation used in this study closely resembles the one described by Barnsley and Ellis.

I began my analysis by reviewing all of the data several times over, reading and rereading the worksheet data, my field notes and transcriptions from the group sessions. I looked for patterns and separated the data into theme or question areas. I also used key word analysis to track words or descriptions used by the girls, noting all the words or descriptions used to talk about the same topic or theme and listing the quotes from the group discussions and worksheets that I thought would be useful. After this initial process of separating out the data, I reflected upon the research assumptions in order to determine what linkages were emerging between the data and my assumptions about what the Project would reveal. I consulted with some of the girls participating in the study, and then left the data for a period of time in order to return to it with a fresh perspective.

Upon returning to the data, I reviewed and refined how the data was organized. I compared the data to the literature review, particularly in relation to bicultural socialization and group work, in order to determine the links and gaps. During the final stages of analysis and interpretation, I started to think about how the data could be applied to take some form of action. Through the entire process of analysis and interpretation, I was guided by Barnsley and Ellis’ advice to “stay with what the informants have told you – let what they said guide the analysis” (p. 61).

Validity & Limitations

I considered issues of validity in relation to focus groups as a data gathering tool and in relation to participatory action research as a methodology. As discussed, group work can be an effective tool in facilitating cross-cultural discussion, and as data
gathering tool, groups can be effective in enhancing individual participation (Chau, 1991; Bilides,, 1991; Carey, 1994). According to Carey (1994), a group can be a particularly effective approach for discussing complex issues involving many levels of feelings and experience, such as race and culture. She states that “data regarding perceptions and opinions are enriched through group interaction because individual participation can be enhanced in a group setting” (p. 225). At the same time, Carey identified issues to be aware of in the analysis of qualitative data from group research. First, specific to comprehensiveness of findings, she stated,

“in analysis, a category or theme cannot be assumed to be absent merely because no relevant responses were mentioned in the session. Therefore, simple counts are not appropriate for this type of analysis due to the nature of data from a group setting” (p. 234).

This point relates to broader concern associated with qualitative research that it is limited in its capacity to establish a “norm” which can be generalized back to a wider population or to demonstrate the magnitude of a problem or issue. This would suggest that the findings of this study relate specifically to the girls who participated in the group sessions. It is important to note that generalizability in the statistical sense is not a goal of this study. Rather, it is left to the reader to determine how the findings may be applicable to other settings and population groups. Second, Carey identified a potential risk to the validity of the group data in that participants may adjust their behaviour, such as censoring themselves, conforming to others or exaggerating, due to a variety of factors including lack of trust, self-esteem, peer pressure, or past experiences in a group.

Critics of participatory action research argued that a collaborative and interactive relationship between the researcher and participant seriously compromises the objectivity and validity of the data. This argument has been countered by Sohng (1995) who stated that there can be no such thing as an objective or disinterested researcher. Alternatively,
she put forth that democratic collaboration with disenfranchised group is, in fact, central for valid social work research, which is premised on values of self-determination and on an “understanding that those who experience disenfranchisement have the most potential for analyzing and understanding what that experience is and how that experience must be transformed” (Sohng, p. 13).

According to Sohng (1995), the conventional notion of validity relies on the existence of one truth and does not fit with the methodology of participatory action research which views truth as dynamic and historically and socially constructed patterns. Sohng criticized conventional conceptualizations of objectivity, stating that too many models of social science replay and reinforce the theme of disenfranchisement. She suggested that participatory action research’s “claim to being a valid process lies in its emphasis on experiential and personal encounters” and on an understanding that there is a continuum between truth and error (Sohng, 1995, p. 14). Using Sohng’s reasoning as a basis for understanding validity in relation to participatory action research, this study’s validity must be assessed by different questions.

Sohng identified three types of validity, namely interpersonal, contextual and catalytic validity. First, interpersonal validity can be evaluated by assessing quality of awareness and trustworthiness of the researcher, the adequacy of reflexivity and the soundness of inferences drawn from interpersonal communications. Contextual validity can be evaluated by asking whether the findings are right given the way of framing the research issue or whether the way of framing the research is meaningful or useful. Finally, catalytic validity asks, “To what extent does this research present new possibilities for social action; does it stimulate normative dialogue about how to organize?” (p. 15).
This study aimed to address these three types of validity which are deeply connected to the theoretical frameworks guiding the research methodology. My intention was that my effectiveness as a researcher, including my trustworthiness, attention to ethical issues and reflexivity, positively impacted the interpersonal validity of this study. I attempted to strengthen the contextual validity of the study by asking a research question that would be illuminating to social work practitioners who work with girls. The research question was meant to be useful by providing practical ways to engage in group work, as opposed to gaining knowledge that is difficult to apply to social work practice. I tried to increase catalytic validity by creating multiple opportunities to apply and distribute the knowledge gained from the study. Most of all, I aimed to validate the findings by creating an experience that was meaningful and valuable to the girls who participated in the study.

Ethical Issues

All research must consider the balance between the potential benefits and harm of the research and address any ethical issues that could arise. This study aimed to involve individuals who are often marginalized by their age, gender, race and culture and to collect sensitive data about their experiences. I attempted to protect the rights of the girls who participated in the Girls’ Group Project through a variety of ways.

First, I ensured that girls participated in the study on a completely voluntary and informed basis. I did not pressure girls to participate but rather relied on third party recruitment. Informational flyers were posted at places frequented by girls, and school staff distributed copies. It was the responsibility of the girls to contact me or attend the information sessions if they were interested. In addition, I also asked that girls secure permission from their parents to participate in the group and research.
I attempted to address the risks associated with participating in this study, particularly in relation to the personal sharing by girls in a group format or bringing attention to their identity as girls of colour. I tried to tune into the risks involved in voicing opinions that may or may not be shared by others and what could trigger strong emotions and feelings. I spoke with each participant about the importance of respecting the confidentiality of each other and the group. As well, I was aware that girls may feel stigmatized by identifying themselves as “bicultural” or “of colour”; therefore, I tried to use language and recruitment materials that did not negatively label or identify the girls.

I maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of the girls and their work during the group sessions by securing all identifiable information in a locked cabinet, including all audiotapes, hard copies of the transcripts and computer disks. No identifying information is available to the readers of this thesis. Girls themselves determined their own roles as well as the information about the group activities and process they wanted to share as a part of their follow-up “action” tasks after the completion of the study.

The methodological approach of participatory action research required both the researcher and participants to help create and maintain authentic and mutual relationships (Barnsely & Ellis, 1992; Sohng, 1995). This raised ethical issues related to power and authority. For example, as an adult facilitator, I did not want the contributions of the participants to be minimized due to their young age. Thus, I described my goal as to work collaboratively with and learn from the girls as well as to share ownership of the study with them. One of the primary concerns of this study was to ensure that the typical hierarchical relationship between student and teacher was transformed into a process of collaborative and joint learning. Moreover, guided by structural social work theory, my
commitment was to engage in explicit reflexivity to examine my own social power and how it manifested in the Girls’ Group Project.

Finally, I attempted to address the problems that often plague short-term programs when relationships are made, trust is established, expectations grow, and then the program ends and participants are left disappointed. Consistent with participatory action research, the goal of this study was to create action in and of itself but also to create knowledge towards further action and change. Thus, I felt it was imperative to provide follow-up activities in which girls could disseminate their research findings as well as choose other ways to continue their action. To this end, I invited the girls to participate as panelists in a workshop for social service providers, Supporting the Healthy Development of Culturally Diverse Girls at the Justice Institute of British Columbia in June 2000. Also, I shared information about a national research project involving girls of colour and how participants could become involved in local efforts. I viewed and respected the girls as “experts” of their own experiences and attempted to provide them with meaningful opportunities to share their knowledge.

Advocacy & Communication of the Research

Swigonski (1993) asserted the need to clearly identify the beneficiaries of the research. In the spirit of standpoint theory as well as Freire’s problem-posing education theory, the researcher must consider how the research contributes to the oppression or empowerment of the participants, how the outcomes will be used and what strategies can be in place to ensure that the studies benefit the group. Barnsley and Ellis (1992) described participatory research as the "systematic collection and analysis of information for the purpose of taking action and making change" (p. 9). Furthermore, participatory action research emphasizes the role that participants play in shaping the research process as well
as in acting on the findings. They outlined that effective policy and programs depend on strong advocacy and input from people with first-hand experience of the issues (Barnsley and Ellis, 1992).

With the girls' agreement, I disseminated their findings and research by the completion of various academic papers, the development of curriculum for social service providers working with adolescent girls and the completion of summary reports for interested parties such as school staff. As well, I will continue to find ways for girls themselves to share their experiences and findings. It is hoped that wide dissemination of the findings within the field social work and education will contribute to the evolution of services and policies responsive to the needs of girls of colour.

Overview of the Group Design

The Girls' Group Project was a six-week program specifically for girls of colour. The goal was to use the group model to invite girls of colour to dialogue about their views, increase their understanding and conscious awareness of their own standpoint and involve girls in the creation of knowledge about the experiences of girls of colour. To this end, the group sessions were loosely structured so that girls could shape the agenda by identifying topics and activities. The design of the Girls' Group Project was marked by several key characteristics.

Group Participants

Participation was open to adolescent girls attending an inner-city secondary school in Vancouver, British Columbia who (1) were between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, (2) were people of colour, including individuals of African, Asian, Latin American and Aboriginal descent and (3) experienced two different cultural systems, specifically the
culture of their families and the culture of mainstream Canada. The selection of the group participants was guided by a desire to identify the day-to-day realities of less powerful groups, consistent with a feminist standpoint perspective of social work research. The group was not aimed at a high-risk population; rather, it included "typical" adolescent girls who may go unnoticed by professionals, have generally supportive families and are generally performing at adequate to above adequate levels in school.

School-based

The group sessions were held in a classroom at the secondary school. Findings by Lewis and Ford (1994) highlighted the importance of housing groups where participants are likely to demonstrate their learning and understanding. As girls interact with peers as well as adults such as teachers and counsellors at school, classrooms would be primary sites to apply the learning and understanding acquired through group participation. As well, Dodd’s (1994) study with South Asian girls highlighted the difficulties girls had in participating in activities held outside of the academic parameters of school. Thus, holding the group sessions at the school was a strategy to increase the likelihood that girls of diverse backgrounds would be permitted to participate in the Project.

Small Group Setting

Although a restriction was not put on the group size, it was anticipated that an optimum group size to facilitate honest sharing and discussion would be four to ten participants. Carey (1994) suggested that optimal size for focus group research varies from five to twelve participants. However, she highlighted that it is more important to consider the sensitivity and complexity of the topic, and the abilities, expectations and needs of the group members, with the realization that a person more likely to be comfortable in a small group than a large group. With smaller groups, each member has a
greater opportunity to talk. This is particularly important when working with girls. Smaller groups help to ensure that each girl has an opportunity to participate and that group facilitators can more easily manage the group dynamics, process the information, attend to each member and be aware of safety issues. As well, smaller groups may help to facilitate meaningful relationships among the participants.

Two Co-Facilitators

Lukes and Land (1990) identified several potential roles that the social worker can fulfill when working with individuals of diverse cultures who may be at risk of isolation and thus at greater risk for social or health concerns. For example, the social worker's role could be to connect people to their communities to act as mediators, translators and models to share experiences and insight or to help in the development and use of analytical skills in problem solving. The social work researcher may engage in research to confirm, reject, or modify current predictive theories of human behaviour or act as an educator about the central issues that individuals cope with on a daily basis as they negotiate the bicultural socialization experience. The group was facilitated by two women, one from the dominant racial group and myself, a woman of colour. This strategy was purposefully implemented to model cross-cultural dialogue, to increase the research validity regarding the content of the group sessions, and to provide role models based on gender and non-dominant cultural status.

Regular & Consistent Sessions

The group met weekly for two-hour sessions, for a total of six sessions. Weekly interaction provided opportunities for the facilitators and the group members to have consistent and regular contact so that trust and relationships could be established. As well, the weekly sessions provided participants with regular opportunities to provide
mutual support to each other and develop skills that could be generalized in other
interactions during the week (Lewis & Ford, 1991).

**Diverse Expressive Tools**

Group activities included a diversity of expressive tools, including various worksheets
and handouts, art projects and group discussion, in order to provide the girls with multiple
ways to have a voice. This approach was implemented in recognition of the variability
among girls in regards to safety levels, confidence and personal preferences.

**The Girls as Co-Researchers**

The girls were invited to be participants but also co-researchers in the
implementation of the group and the gathering of the research data. Both facilitators
stressed an understanding that the experiences, ideas and concerns that the girls shared in
the group represented their wealth of knowledge and expertise. The empowerment
emphasis of the project required that the interpretations of concepts and discussions of
concerns be determined by girls themselves. The participants’ interpretations of their
standpoints and day-to-day experiences would be viewed as a critical source of data in
informing the research process and issues. (Mullaly, 1993; Swigonski, 1993). We
provided multiple opportunities for the girls to become active partners in the re-
construction of knowledge and understanding of their experiences and in the analysis of
the group process. To this effect, we invited girls to provide evaluation feedback, to
review the transcriptions and key findings from the group activities, and to participate in
follow-up activities that emerged from the Project.
Overview of Implementation

Implementation of the Girls’ Group Project consisted of four main phases: collaboration with the school, outreach to the girls, group sessions, and lastly, evaluation and follow-up.

Collaboration with School Staff

The first phase of the study involved the selection of an appropriate school site within Vancouver. I identified an inner-city secondary school in Vancouver as an ideal location due to my experiences and understanding of the cultural diversity within the community. I met with key links at the school, namely the School Principal and Multicultural Counsellor, and learned that they were willing to support the study. These school officials also confirmed the cultural diversity of the student population and expressed a willingness to offer support services for adolescent girls of colour.

Outreach to the Girls

Before the actual group began, I scheduled a lunch hour "information session" so that my co-facilitator and I could talk with the girls during school hours. The group was promoted as an opportunity for culturally diverse girls to get-together to meet new friends and talk about issues that were important to them. The information session and the group itself was promoted through information flyers posted throughout the school and distributed by school counsellors (Appendix A). The Multicultural Counsellor helped in this process by handing out flyers to girls as well as keeping some in the counselling centre's wait room. No direct requests were made, and it was the responsibility of girls to voluntarily attend the information session and identify themselves as willing participants in the group. A description of the process of recruitment and group participants will follow in the findings.
The Group Sessions

Six group sessions were held, and each was approximately two hours in length. Group size varied from three to eight girls. The sessions generally consisted of discussion around issues initiated by the group leaders and the girls themselves. We brought in materials to initiate discussion, and the participants engaged in various activities including collage building. We also provided snacks and activity materials. We all participated in group discussions as well as completed individual worksheets.

Evaluation & Follow-up

Girls participated in verbal and written evaluations of the group sessions through group discussions and individual worksheets. This provided process-focused feedback, including specific input about the effectiveness of group with adolescent girls of colour. As well, the other facilitator and I debriefed after each session, and I kept descriptive notes of our observations. I kept a journal about the specific group discussions, and three sessions, those involving specific discussions about identity, biculturalism and evaluation of the Girls’ Group Project, were audiotaped and transcribed. We planned several follow-up activities so that the group process would not necessarily need to end once the research project was completed.
CHAPTER IV: Findings

The findings of the study are presented in two parts to reflect both my own and the girls' perspectives of the group process. First, based on my journal notes and observations, I present an overview of the implementation of the Girls’ Group Project, detailing the outreach activities and each group session. This overview helped to answer the research question by identifying the specific benchmarks and obstacles that emerged during each step of the Project’s implementation and then offering specific recommendations for designing and implementing group work with girls of colour.

Second, based on the perspectives and voices of girls, I completed a thematic analysis of the key features of the group process as a whole. This analysis addressed issues of inter-group and participant-facilitator similarities and helped to answer how group work can engage girls of colour in discussions that are meaningful to them. The reporting was extracted from the data gathering tools including detailed journal notes and transcriptions of group sessions, popular education techniques used during the group sessions, debriefings with my co-facilitator as well as discussions with group participants. I implemented methods of analysis consistent with participatory action research in that I drew out major themes and carried out word analysis to interpret meanings.

Overview of the Project Implementation

Outreach & recruitment. As stated, the information session and the group itself was promoted through information flyers posted throughout the school and distributed by school counsellors. The design of flyers attempted to utilize language and images that would appeal to adolescent girls and specifically reach girls of colour. I consulted with several colleagues who are women of colour in order to assess how we, in our youth,
would have responded to recruitment of "girls of colour". The consensus was that we would not have identified as "of colour" and that as adolescents trying so hard to fit in, such distinctions would not have made much sense or appealed to us. In our own experiences, it was in our early adult years that we explored the utility and appropriateness of such language. As well, we asked girls participating in an existing girls' group for their advice. They agreed that inviting "girls of colour" would not be effective, suggested that we include pictures, use bright colours and focus on language related to ethnic diversity. Based on such feedback and consultation, I selected to design flyers with bright colours and an invitation to "ethnically diverse girls" to participate in the Girls' Group Project to meet new friends and discuss issues that were important to them (Appendix I).

The information session provided us with an opportunity to describe the Girls' Group Project, introduce ourselves to the girls as well as to begin preliminary evaluation of our partnership with the school and our recruitment strategies. We chose to have the information session at lunch hour during school day to make attendance as easy as possible. This way, the girls did not have to travel to a site or forfeit their after-school leisure time. We hoped to create a relaxed, non-threatening environment in which to introduce the Girls' Group Project, bringing snacks and speaking informally about who we were.

Our first finding related to the high level of formality dictated by the classroom and the expectations linked to a school-based program. Although we hoped to develop an open dialogue with the girls, we felt that we were viewed by the girls as the "expert" adults, consistent with Freire's description of traditional teaching relationships. This reinforced our desire to clearly communicate our views of girls as competent partners in our project. To this end, we shared our personal reasons for wanting to be a part of the
group, and I disclosed some of my own experiences as a bicultural adolescent. My co-facilitator summarized her background in working with girls and facilitating girls’ groups, and I described my academic background and the purpose of this project, as related to my Masters program. We invited questions and feedback, and one girl asked some well-thought out questions, such as “why are you doing this?” and “what will we get out of it?”.

As my co-facilitator continued to describe the project, I distributed consent forms which outlined the purpose of the group, criteria for participation and general ideas of how the group could proceed. I purposefully chose this role in order to connect with each girl on an individual level. As a result of one-on-one interactions, several girls voiced potential barriers to their participation. The need for parental consent seemed to be a significant barrier for several girls who attended the lunch hour information session. They stated that it would be difficult for them to approach their parents about the girls’ group and particularly about attending an activity that was not during school hours. Several also asked why the group was being held after school and expressed interest in a lunch hour session. As the information session came to an end, we asked the girls to sign up on a form if they were interested in participating and informed them that I would follow up with a phone call.

Sixteen girls of colour attended the information session, and of this group, eleven signed up for the group. As we were hoping for four to ten girls to participate in the group sessions, we were very pleased with the turnout. We were aware that attrition would likely occur, and with sixteen attending and eleven signing up, we felt positive about the potential to have four to eight girls actually participate.
The group was diverse in terms of age and race. It included immigrant girls as well as individuals born in Canada, and importantly, all of the girls who attended the information session represented communities of colour. Clearly, our partnership with the school and commitment on the part of staff assisted in this process. As well, our decisions regarding the use of language, that is to outreach to “ethnically diverse girls” in order to recruit girls of colour, was successful.

We learned several lessons from the information session. First, we learned the importance of anticipating what the physical environment will be like and how this will impact on the group process and individual roles. In particular, we would take into account the formal roles associated with a classroom setting and try to shift such expectations by setting the room up differently. We learned the value of building in opportunities to speak with each girl individually in order to learn more about them and hear their specific opinions and concerns. By the end of the session, we had many questions about how girls had heard about the group and what motivated them to attend the information session. We learned that we could have used the introductions as an opportunity to hear more from the girls, and individual input would have been facilitated further by distributing feedback forms at the end of the information session. Finally, we learned that food was an important factor in creating a comfortable and welcoming environment.

As a follow-up to the information session, I contacted each girl who had signed up on the list by telephone. This outreach strategy was meant to serve informational, evaluation and engagement purposes. The telephone call allowed me to provide further information about the group and answer specific questions. This strategy was particularly useful for evaluation and planning purposes, as it allowed me to elicit individual feedback about the
information session, particularly in terms of learning more about the barriers that may limit girls' participation in the group. Finally, the telephone calls were helpful to build relationships and learn more about each girl.

During the phone calls, most girls reported that the information session was helpful. They stated that they had learned about the group from school counsellors as well as from the posters. I learned that most of the girls who attended the information session were immigrants to Canada. Girls identified a variety of barriers that may impact their attendance, namely the need for parental consent and rules limiting after school activities.

The Group Sessions

Attendance at the group sessions ranged from three to eight girls. The girls who regularly attended the sessions shared a common experience as immigrants and were all students from the tenth grade. Some immigrated to Canada early in their childhood, and others immigrated later in adolescence. Countries of origin included Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Philippines. Two of the girls who sporadically attended the sessions were second-generation Canadians, with roots in India, and were both in the twelfth grade. They reported that commitments to other extracurricular activities as well as to graduation impacted their regular attendance. All of the girls spoke at least one other language in addition to English, such as Vietnamese, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi and Punjabi.

All of the group sessions occurred in a classroom in the secondary school. In the back of the room, there were two small sofas and an end table. We met with the group in this space in order to create a less formal environment. Snacks were brought to each session.

Session one: introductions. The goals of the first session were to introduce the girls to ourselves, to each other and to the purpose of the group. Planned activities included a
review of the group process, group norms and issues of confidentiality, an ice-breaker questionnaire (see Appendix II) and group discussion. Three girls attended session one, two from grade ten and one from grade twelve. The two girls from grade ten immigrated to Canada as children, with one from Sri Lanka and another from Vietnam. The girl from grade twelve was a second-generation Canadian, with family roots in India.

The ice-breaker questionnaire asked a variety of questions, such as how many languages do you speak, who is your family made up of, do you have an adult ally to share your concerns with and when do you feel most powerful? The girls were encouraged to share with the group only the answers they felt comfortable with. We learned interesting and sometimes unexpected details about the girls’ lives, highlighting the important of never assuming to understand or know another individual’s experience.

Potential Obstacles: Several factors could have acted as barriers in participation in session one including the big gap in time between the information session and the first group session due to school strikes. As well, the door of the classroom was locked when we arrived and we did not have a poster on the door to confirm the scheduled group; consequently, if girls arrived before we did, they may have left. Additionally, the sunny weather and after-school soccer practices may have impacted attendance. In regard to potential barriers in meaningful participation in the group sessions, we wondered about two factors. First, we wondered how the girl from the more senior grade would influence the group process, namely if her status as the more senior student would intimidate the other girls. Second, we wondered whether meaningful participation would be affected if girls felt confidentiality was not protected.

Benchmarks: At the end of the group discussion about the ice-breaker questionnaire, the topics of art and drawing came up. This led to one of the girl’s taking out her art to share
with us. To take the risk to share something that she had created was a significant gesture, and a benchmark in our trust and relationship. This was an opportunity to learn more about her as an individual, reinforce her skills and assert our confidence in her abilities. When she shared her art with us, we learned that several of the girls enjoyed drawing and doing art projects. Following their interest, we asked if art would be a good activity for the next session. The girls agreed, and we discussed a collage activity. We reinforced the idea of sharing meaningful things with each other, and all the girls agreed to bring something to share at next session, such as music or art.

Session two: identity. The goal of session two was to begin an exploration about identity through art. Five girls attended, two were the girls from grade ten who had attended session one and three were new participants. The new girls were immigrants from the Philippines, Vietnam and Pakistan, and two were from grade eleven and one was from grade ten. The primary activity was to create a collage using magazine clippings to reflect multiple viewpoints of themselves, including how they saw themselves or how their family, friends, or community viewed them. The girls prepared individual collages, using magazines and cardboard, in order to visually illustrate how they see themselves or how others, such as parents or teachers, see them.

Potential Obstacles: There were no obvious barriers that I could identify during session two. I was aware of the need to be patient and gentle in building relationships with the girls. Two of the new participants did not actively participate in group conversation; however, they did actively work on the collage activity. I was cautious about alienating them by pressuring them to speak; alternatively, I chose rather to ask non-intrusive questions about their collage and offer encouragement.
**Benchmarks:** By building on the interest the girls expressed in art, the collage activity was a benchmark in building relationship in that it demonstrated our respect of their choices and interests. The activity reduced formalities so that girls could “keep busy” without putting pressure on individual participation in a group discussion. At the end of the group, we introduced an activity to close the group session. This involved choosing an “angel card” which had affirmations written on them. This was a positive activity as it brought each girl back to the larger group, affirmed each girl’s belonging as a group member and gave each girl a chance to verbally express something positive about themselves. An additional benchmark in this session was that two of the new participants were friends of girls who had attended the last session. I viewed this as positive in that girls were recruiting each other, thus suggesting that they felt the group was a useful way to spend their time as well as demonstrating their leadership skills among the girls. The girls wanted more time to work on their collages, and so the group agreed that the third group session would be devoted to completing and then discussing their collages.

**Session three: identity.** The third session continued the exploration about identity. Eight girls attended this session, including three new members. During the first half, the girls completed their collage activities, listened to music brought in by the girls and engaged in a variety of group discussions related to parents’ expectations about appropriate mates, their own expectations and hopes. After completing their collages, we returned to a group discussion and each girl had the opportunity to present and describe their collages. We outlined that they were expected to share as much or as little as they chose to and that the other group members were to give each girl the space to share without interruption. All of the girls shared a great deal about how they viewed
themselves, demonstrating courage in themselves and trust in others. The group ended with positive affirmations and chocolates.

Potential Obstacles: I was aware that diverse styles of participating could hinder the participation of all girls as well as integration of new members; moreover, I observed that this session’s group was split between quieter girls and the new participants who were more vocal. It was important that we had the previous week’s session with the quieter girls, as I had an opportunity to spend more time with them and thus build greater safety. This seemed to buffer the impact of new, more vocal participants so that all of the girls could participate comfortably. It was clear that their connection with us was supporting the quieter girls’ participation; for example, as they shared their collages, they spoke and looked directly at us.

Benchmarks: The group membership increased. Each girl took a risk in sharing with us and each other about some of their hopes and vulnerabilities, particularly the younger girls sharing when age is so salient. They brought items to share with us, including photographs and music. The collage activity was a great success, demonstrated by their eagerness to participate as well as direct positive feedback.

Session four: culture. The goal of session four was to explore girls’ interpretations and understandings of concepts related to biculturalism and multiculturalism. Three girls, all from grade ten, attended this session. The primary activities were the completion of worksheets and then a group discussion. The worksheets gave the girls a chance to individually describe their beliefs about the advantages and disadvantages of being bicultural, how they experienced cultural conflict as well as what multiculturalism meant to them. As a group, we discussed each question, with each girl having the opportunity to share as much or as little as she wanted.
Potential Obstacles: The weekly group had been missed due to spring break, and thus there was a two week gap between sessions. This may have negatively impacted on attendance rates. At the same time, we viewed the fluctuating attendance as a positive indicator of the girls’ voluntary participation in the group. We had hoped that they would feel safe to come and go without feeling guilty. There were obstacles to openly discussing issues of racism. When the topic was introduced, the girls backed away from discussion. The resistance may have been related to a variety of factors including the classroom setting, cultural taboos that silence issues of race or the impact of the group facilitators, one of whom was white.

Benchmarks: Although the girls chose not to openly discuss issues of racism in group discussions, they did describe personal experiences of prejudice in their written answers. A dual relationship was forming between the girls and I, one that developed during the group sessions and one that emerged on paper. They shared more personal information on paper, particularly related to specific experiences of being “othered” with the knowledge that I would be reading their answers for the purpose of this research. This session also represented a benchmark in the goal of the Project to provide an opportunity for critical problem-posing education. We asked the girls if they had completed activities like this previously, and they stated they had. However, they stated that this was the first time they were able to share and discuss their answers, that is to engage in critical educational dialogue.

Session five: games. Following the “deep work” of the identity collages during session two and three and then session four’s critical discussion about culture, girls chose to play games during session five. Four girls attended the session, and we spent the two hours playing card games such as UNO.
Potential Obstacles: Nothing to note.

Major benchmark: This session marked an important break from the critical thinking the girls had participated in during the previous sessions. It was a benchmark in that the girls selected the activities, and it increased a sense of group cohesiveness. We had the chance to see very spirited sides of the girls, both the competitive and unapologetic determination to win as well as the empathic encouragement of each other. It was during this session that we felt we saw the girls in their uncensored emotions. It appeared that the group process was creating a sense of shared experience, and by session five, girls were developing trust both with us and with each other.

Session six: reflection & evaluation. The goal of session six was to collectively reflect back on the group process and evaluate both the components and impact of the six sessions. Four girls attended this session. The primary activity consisted of individual evaluation forms, followed by a group discussion. The evaluation form asked girls about the activities they enjoyed, the value of discussing issues of race and culture, and the effectiveness of the facilitators (see Appendix III). As a group, we reviewed the questions, and the girls shared as much or as little as they wanted. We also brainstormed how they would design the ideal girls’ group, with the girls selecting the ideal location, day of week, time, membership and major activities of the group sessions. The session ended with a group agreement to meet next week to plan follow-up activities and to go on a celebratory outing for ice cream.

Potential Obstacles: As noted previously, there are methodological issues related to focus group research. The girls’ willingness to respond honestly or offer criticism may have been limited due to a desire to please us or to preserve relationships with us or among the girls.
Benchmarks: The girls offered conflicting feedback in some areas of the evaluation. This may indicate trust and safety to voice their honest feelings. Session six was an opportunity to validate and encourage the girls in their roles as experts. This session was a benchmark in reinforcing non-traditional learning relationships, with the facilitators and participants sharing roles as learners and educators.

Follow-up activities. During the planning of follow-up activities, we invited the girls to participate as panel presenters at a training workshop that I was co-facilitating at the Justice Institute of BC. Four of the girls volunteered to participate. We reviewed what their role as presenters would be, and together, we identified the content for the individual presentations. The content was based on the Girls’ Group Project. For example, one girl described goals and activities of the Project, while others reviewed some of our research findings related to bicultural identity and adult allies. The girls were presented as teachers to the adult learners attending the workshop, and they were paid for their work.

Summary of Project Implementation

Overview of all the group sessions highlighted several potential barriers to keep in mind in implementing group work with girls of colour. This study demonstrated that schedule and location could impact girls’ participation. Time of day was important, as some girls who attended the information session reported difficulties in attending afterschool activities. Girls who did attend the group sessions stated that immediately after school was preferable to early evenings. With regards to location, girls reported that school-based activities had more credibility in the eyes of their parents. On the other hand, it was challenging to protect confidentiality of the girls in school-based locations, with the unpredictable presence of community members, other students and teachers.
This study highlighted that acquiring parental consent can create a barrier to some girls’ participation, as some girls who attended the information session were unwilling to approach their parents about attending an extracurricular activity.

With regard to group facilitation, this study highlighted potential barriers in discussing sensitive and taboo topics such as racism and oppression. The process required on-going analysis of issues related to issues of power as well as close attention to group dynamics. It was important that we attempted to accommodate multiple styles of communication, particularly in terms of the differences in communication and language between youth and adult cultures.

Review of all the group sessions highlighted useful practice strategies for the implementation of group programs with girls of colour. These strategies related to (1) outreach activities, (2) physical environment, (3) planning of activities, and (4) relationship-building.

I found that successful outreach required taking time for a one-to-one connection with each girl, be it through a short face-to-face contact or telephone conversation. Outreach was also enhanced by connecting with other adult allies that the girls were already familiar with or had an established relationship with, such as a teacher or counsellor. Outreach efforts did not end after the information session and follow-up telephone calls, and I provided on-going one-to-one attention to each girl to reinforce their interest in the group.

I found that a strength of the Girls’ Group Project related to establishing an informal and comfortable environment. This was done by restructuring the classroom space, bringing in snacks and openly discussing how the group was different from class-
room group work. A relaxed environment was also created by keeping membership open so that girls themselves could determine which sessions to attend.

Although the group sessions aimed to be unstructured, I found that it was important to have some structured activities planned for the initial groups. These provided girls with ice-breaker activities to get to know each other and the facilitators. It was important that the activities provided multiple ways of expressing themselves, for example through writing and art. As the girls shared more about themselves, their personal hobbies and interests were integrated into group activities which further increased their engagement. The hands-on activities gave the girls “distractions” to focus on so that they could assess their comfort level with the other group members. In addition, the themes that emerged from the activities provided a spring board for more spontaneous, girl-driven discussions.

Finally, I found that there were several key features of our relationship-building efforts. It was helpful to ask girls about their own interests, hopes and day-to-day activities. By asking key questions, we demonstrated interest in each girl as an individual as well as gathered information to shape the group sessions. It was important to be honest with girls about who we were and why we were initiating this study. Because we were clear about our interest in the topics of race and identity, the girls gathered more information about us as individuals and the group was given a sense of direction. Most of all, our relationships with the girls were enhanced by using humor, finding many opportunities to laugh and trying to have fun.
Significant Features of the Group Process

It is important to note again that the goal of this study was to learn about how group work can be effective in engaging girls of colour, as opposed to measuring levels of change in individual behaviour. A thematic analysis of the group discussions and the girls’ evaluation of the Girls’ Group Project identified several significant features of the group process. The girls’ evaluation consisted of qualitative feedback regarding their experience: did they have fun?, what discussion topics did they enjoy?, was this something that they found helpful? Although the significant features of the group process are presented separately, my intention is not to suggest that they are distinct categories. Rather, the features overlapped and interacted with each other in shaping the overall experience of the Girls’ Group Project.

A space for girls of colour. The girls who participated in the group sessions represented a variety of Asian communities in Vancouver; many participants traced their ancestry to countries such as China, India, Vietnam, the Philippines and Pakistan. During the final group session, participants were asked to consider the utility of groups specifically involving girls of colour, which in the case of their group referred to Asian girls. Their responses revealed some degree of conflict and discomfort. The following statements demonstrate the continuum of their responses, from those who felt that group member similarity based on non-dominant cultural status was important to those who thought it was not a good idea.

Several statements by girls indicated that it was important that they shared non-dominant cultural status. One girl stated that this similarity “helps them feel not alone”. This participant highlights the potential for girls of colour to feel isolated, thus hinting at the marginalization some girls may feel in being “left alone” or outside of the dominant
culture. Another girl stated, “I think it’s a good idea because no one will get in the way of what they actually have to say.” This participant highlights the silencing and barriers that some girls of colour experience in feeling heard and valued. Another girl reported:

I would share my feelings or get help from this group since other people from the girls’ group have faced the same situations as I do, like with the bicultural things of facing a whole new place in Canada that’s different from our country.”

This participant highlights that as girls of colour, they share common experiences. This common ground facilitated her own personal sharing with the other group members.

Other statements indicated a degree of ambivalence about the importance of non-dominant cultural status among the group participants. One girl stated, “I’d say yes and no depending on what girls want in a group because there could be circumstances of positive and negative reactions. Although not divulging the what the positive and negative reactions may be or look like, this participant alludes to safety issues that girls of colour experience in speaking honestly and freely. She also seems to recognize the political nature of a culturally-based group, suggesting that there could be resistance from the dominant group. Another girl stated, “yes, I think it’s a good idea, but I think it would be better for everybody from different backgrounds to have a group and not just girls of colour.” It appears that this participant perceives value in girls’ groups specifically for girls of colour but then focuses on the concept of equality so that girls of colour do not appear to have something that the others do not.

Finally, some statements by girls suggest that group similarity based on non-dominant cultural status is not a good idea. As one girl stated, “It would be nice to see everybody together and not just like trying to isolate the girls of colour all by themselves”. Similar to some of the ambivalent statements, this participant highlights the value in having opportunities for all girls and identifies a potential risk of isolation.
Participant – facilitator similarity. As facilitators, we were aware of the importance of sameness in gender, and we strove to build on this connection to foster supportive, power-sharing relationships with girls of colour. Feedback by the girls supported our assumption that gender was important for engagement. For example, one girl reported that “If there was a guy facilitator, the girls wouldn’t express what they feel inside.” The Girls’ Group Project also provided insight into how girls of colour perceive the importance of cultural similarity between themselves as participants and women as facilitators.

Here again, closer examination of the girls’ responses reveals some degree of conflict and discomfort among girls when asked about the relevance of the cultural background of adult facilitators of girls’ groups. The following statements demonstrate the continuum of their responses, from those who felt the cultural background was important to those who thought it was not significant.

Several girls stated that participant – facilitator similarity was important. For example, one girl stated that, “It was useful because if, for example, that they [the facilitators] were both from the same culture, our talks would have been more specific or so but now we were able to make it equal to all.” It appears that this participant is stating that particular issues would not have been discussed, thus the discussions would have been “more specific” if the facilitators were both from the dominant cultural group. As all the girls were of Asian background, it appears that she is suggesting that a facilitator from a similar, non-dominant cultural background as the girls helped to give their issues value and create a more balanced discussion that was “equal to all”. Another girl stated that it was important “because then they can understand more the same problems that they faced and that we have faced too about being bicultural.” It appears that this participant is
stating the importance of shared experiences. She implies that a facilitator of colour will have the ability to understand the multiple viewpoints of girls of colour.

Other statements revealed a degree of ambivalence. One girl stated:

I think it doesn’t matter that the facilitator has to be from your background. The important thing is that the facilitator understands and has experience or faced the same kinds of problems that the bicultural people had, maybe.

This participant begins by stating difference does not matter. She suggests that it could be useful if the facilitator has faced bicultural issues yet seems to acknowledge that culture and race are not the only basis for oppression. Another girl revealed, “I don’t think that it’s important, but it would be interesting to have one from the same cultural background as me.” This participant begins by stating it is not important that someone of her own cultural background facilitates the group, but then she seems to counter this with “but it would be interesting”, acknowledging that it might be of value.

Alternatively, some statements indicated that participant–facilitator similarity was not relevant. One participant reported:

I don’t really feel about what cultures they were from. I did not feel any differences. They were just like friends.

This participant minimizes the importance of cultural difference in impacting her ability to become friends with a facilitator. This may emerge from a desire to defend her own ability to build relationships across difference, as opposed to speaking about how cultural similarity can foster connection. Another girl emphasized:

I didn’t care about their cultures. I’d say I’m more focused on what the girls’ group was all about and what we will be discussing.

This participant minimizes differences, implying that a focus on issues of culture could detract from the “work” focus of “what the girls’ group was all about”. Interestingly, the purpose of the group was exactly to discuss our identities in relation to culture and race.
An opportunity to build a peer network. Through group discussions, girls highlighted that the groups were valuable to them because of the opportunity to build relationships with other girls and feel a sense of belonging. Girls stated that during the Girls’ Group Project, they were able to “get to know each other” and “make friends”. Some girls appreciated the value in meeting new people and learning from them: “I met new people from different cultures and learned about getting along with other personalities and attitudes”. Another comment highlighted the value in meeting new friends because “hanging around with the same friends gets boring”. Another participant shared that “misery needs company”, and the group provided her with the opportunity to meet girls who experienced conflicts similar to her own. She stated that building relationships with other girls of colour “made me feel like I am not alone”, while another participant shared that the peer network helped her to realize that “someone is suffering the same thing I do”. Discussions about what activities they would like to do during the group sessions further reinforced the value of peer relationships. Most often, girls chose to play games or go on outings together, selecting interactive activities that would give them an opportunity to get to know one another better.

An opportunity to talk about experiences of immigration. Girls of colour who participated in the Girls’ Group Project used the group as an opportunity to share their experiences about immigrating to Canada. Together, they identified key factors that impacted their experience and shared stories and feelings about learning to adapt. For example, girls stated that their personal immigration experience was influenced by their age during the time of immigration, their ability to speak English, the size of their cultural group in Vancouver, and the geographical location of their new home. Girls understood that the impact of such factors created experiences that were unique to each girl, but they
also found many similarities across their experiences. The influence of language was identified several times, with the general consensus being that “it’s hard to communicate when you don’t know the language”. Several girls described their experiences as difficult.

I kind of forced myself to speak English, but I didn’t know how, so I had to use body language in front of Canadians in order for them to understand me. It was really frustrating when the Canadians didn’t understand what I was trying to say... it was kind of difficult.

When I came to Canada, I did not know any English. So I had difficulty understanding students and teachers. I did not receive much help from people. There was one boy, he was from my country, but we had a little bit different religion. So what the teacher told him, he had to translate to me.

Limited English proficiency in the classroom resulted in feelings of frustration, as one girl described:

There was one person in my class that could speak the same language to me. But then when I’d speak to that person, that person was not very good at speaking my own language. He wouldn’t understand. Sometimes he’d understand but then sometimes he doesn’t, so I was kind of frustrated too.

Another girl identified the coping strategies she utilized in order to communicate with school staff and peers.

Well, I had to use body language when I wanted them to know. Like when I wanted to go to the washroom, I had to pretend I was washing my hands.

Girls stated that geography played a role in their adjustment. One girl reported that her adjustment in Vancouver was easier than when she lived in Nova Scotia. She accounted for this geographical difference by stating that “Vancouver is multicultural, right, but in Nova Scotia, there’s really less population of my own culture”. Another participant felt that her feeling of culture conflict depended on geographical location, particularly if there were other members of her cultural community in her environment. She stated that in her former city of residence, she “had that feeling of culture conflict because there are very few people with the same culture” as her family.
Girls shared their experiences of learning to adapt to Canadian cultural norms. Girls described the process as “difficult”. One girl stated that “it was really hard for me to live in different worlds” and other stated “you have to change yourself a lot”. They talked about learning new cultural rules about how to eat, how fast to walk and what to wear.

One girl shared, “I didn’t wear pants so people would make fun of me from what I used to wear”. Girls talked about their parents perspective on moving to Canada. One girl stated, they think schools in Canada is better than in my country. Because in my country we have to sit down, not on chairs. The teachers can do whatever they want – beat you up. We have to memorize these fat books. They think Canada’s schools are better.

Another girl related that her parents had “difficulty getting along as well”.

Topics related specifically to immigration were initiated by girls themselves, and once beginning, the girls had both stories and feelings to share about their experiences as immigrants to Canada. Their discussions highlighted the value of group work in engaging girls of colour by providing space to talk about issues related to immigration and their experiences in adapting to life in Canada.

Tools to articulate their sense of self. During two of the group sessions, collaging was introduced as a tool to explore self-identity. This was a successful tool to create interest and engage individual girls in the group process as well as to facilitate sharing and build relationships among the participants. Their high level of interest and engagement was demonstrated by the level of care and work that went into each collage. Some of the participants took the collages home to work on during their free time, and others brought collage materials from home to share with other group members. As one girl reported, “the best part I like [about the girls’ group] is making a collage where you express how you see yourself.”
The following statements were extracted from the girls’ presentations of their collages to the rest of the group. The statements demonstrate how the collage activity facilitated personal sharing and self-disclosures about their sense of self, their hopes and dreams and their values. Some girls reflected on how their parents viewed them:

“See, my dad thinks I’m a brainiac-person. I’m so not a brainiac. I’m not saying I’m stupid or anything at school, but I’m better with my hands….My hands are going to take me into my future. They’re my brain. My brain works with my hands to do the work”.

Participants used the collages to describe their life goals:

I really really want to live life and experience things. More than survival, surviving you know like eat, sleep, clean yourself. I actually want to live life, whether it’s until I’m young or old. I just want to live.

I’d like to be successful in life. I’d like to find a good job and be independent because I don’t want to be those kinds of women who rely on their husbands. And once like if the husband break up with you or divorces, like the women are useless or something. In some countries, the women totally rely on husbands, right…she doesn’t be herself, be independent, she always obey and do everything. I don’t want, I never want to be that kind of person. I want to take care of myself and want to be like my own, and I can take care of myself.

Another participant shared her insecurities:

When I see other people, I envy them for having perfect bodies and those kinds of things. And here I sometimes I don’t know what to wear. Sometimes, everyday I’m really stressed, thinking about a lot of things. And if I have nothing to do, some days I like staying in my room. I like to stay alone. When I’m out with my friends, I’m kind of a shy person. I kind of hangout but join in.

A safe place to share their feelings and problems. Group discussions resulted in the girls’ sharing about their feelings and problems. For example, one girl, who described herself as typically not speaking up in groups, used the group to talk about her personal processes of self-reflection,

I see myself as a really complicated person. I talk with myself a lot, like inside my head, my mind. It’s like my brain is my best friend. So sometimes I don’t like to smile, so I ask myself smile, but I don’t. But I try sometimes to smile. I am a very complicated person. I see myself as half inside as good and half inside as bad. Like, sometimes, the badness inside of me, like this demon, right, tries to
overcome me, but the good side of me kind of like pushes it away. I ask myself sometimes like, who am I, you know? Cause, like, to me, life is just like a dream. Sometimes I ask myself, oh my goodness, I'm living! I just see myself like this is a dream. Like my whole life is just a dream.

Several stated that the group was an appropriate place to talk about “problems related to culture and school” or “bad image” or “problems we have at home or school”. Others stated that the Girls’ Group Project already created a safe environment for them:

I was able to talk about stuff that I wouldn’t normally talk with friends. It was useful because it made me feel good talking about things I had in mind.

I thought that the people here are thoughtful and would not think bad about you. As everyone shares their feelings here, it made me feel comfortable speaking and sharing my feelings.

Girls’ evaluation of the group reinforced the value of “talk[ing] about issues such as girls stuff”, “culture and feelings” and “other stuff that comes to mind”. Such feedback highlights the potential of group work to become a supportive intervention to disclose problems and feelings.

An opportunity to explore issues related to biculturalism. The girls’ discussions about biculturalism revealed four primary themes, (1) experiences of conflict, (2) positive experiences of a bicultural identity, (3) the influence of language on bicultural identity, and (4) the shifting dynamics of bicultural identity.

The girls’ responses indicated that the group was valuable and facilitated the sharing of common experiences related to cultural conflict. One girl reported that “it’s like if I have that feeling of culture conflict, other people do too. And you don’t feel like you’re alone. Like someone else is suffering the same thing I do”. For her, group discussions about culture conflict created a sense of shared experience and belonging.

Girls shared their feelings of conflict in a variety of contexts. One girl spoke about trying to separate herself from her culture, stating that she “doesn’t like having friends from my
own culture”. Similarly, another participant described feelings of being different from girls belonging to her cultural community:

Sometimes the girls from my culture...they live kind of differently. So, sometimes, I think my parents want me to be like them. Because they are totally different. They use my language, movies and songs...they go to all the meetings and stuff like that. Like they call me, and I don’t want to go, I don’t feel like it. Sometimes, I think that maybe they don’t like my attitude.

One participant discussed the difficulties in learning in the cultural norms of multiple cultures. She stated:

You have to follow the cultures properly. One could get it mixed up. Too many traditions to celebrate. Or one feels that they don’t know where they belong.

Another participant echoed such difficulties, disclosing that “it was really hard for me to live in different worlds”. Girls shared their struggles to find their own place, knowing that they may experience a sense of cultural loss. As one participant shared, “sometimes I have to kind of fight with myself in things like should I live like my friends (my cultural) or I should live the way I want to not caring about losing culture”.

In addition to sharing their personal struggles with bicultural issues, girls also named many positive aspects of biculturalism. Girls stated that “you get to learn two different cultures”, and that “being in two cultures can be an exciting thing because you can learn new ways that your own culture doesn’t have. For instance, learning the manners and the ways they eat and chew. I observe these ways by watching people, family and by watching television”. Another stated that she liked to “learn different cultures from other countries because it’s really cool how their traditions are applied and how it is important to see their daily life”. Some girls reported feeling “really comfortable in two cultures”. One described feeling “balanced with my family and the outside world”. Several girls described benefits related to learning and having access to resources:
I think being in two cultures you can learn more. If you like having friends from your culture then you would have more friends if you were in two cultures.

Having two cultures is like having two friends who are totally different from each other and still are your friends. When you have problems with one, you can go to the other.

One participant described her sense of biculturalism, stating “I feel really comfortable in two cultures. If I didn’t move to Canada and stayed in my country, I would be comfortable with one culture”.

Many girls spoke about the importance of language and identified bilingualism as contributing to their sense of bicultural identity. Participants highlighted how proficiency in multiple languages contributed to their ability to flow between cultural environments:

I feel that my culture is kind of connected. I just don’t speak one language at home and another language in school. I speak both languages everywhere I go, home and school.

My worlds are kind of the same because I speak my language at home but English too. I speak English and Vietnamese but I don’t feel like I’m in two worlds because I have friends in my own language too so I speak my own language here at school too.

One participant described how her sense of identity was tied to language, feeling a sense of disconnection when she is not speaking in her first language.

I had some conflicts like when I talk to my brother in English, I felt like I am pretending or acting like someone else. Because I have always talked with them in my first language, so when I talk to them in English, I feel like I am not myself.

The disadvantage of being bicultural is that it is hard for us to communicate with other people when they don’t understand what we’re trying to say.

Finally, girls talked about their identity as bicultural as related to being somewhat of a chameleon. They described their ability or perhaps their necessity of going-between cultures. One girl commented:
I really don’t feel that I’m in two cultures. Even though I am. I have to dress differently at home and all that. Like when I’m at home, all my family, they dress like me so I don’t really feel different. And at school, everybody is dressed like me, so I don’t feel different or in two cultures.

She spoke of not necessarily being different but doing things differently in each situation.

This concept of going-between cultures is echoed by several other participants:

I look at myself that I can fit in any culture by adjusting.

It’s like when I was talking with her (friend) on the phone in English, and then my mom was there and I had to change when I talked to my mom. It was so funny.

I was thinking like Mrs. Doubtfire, when he had to change between a boy and a girl. I think it's like that too.

I have to have two different personalities as my two cultures are different. And with the situation, I will be in each one.

An opportunity to engage in critical thinking. There were several moments when the discussions demonstrated the girls’ attempts to engage in critical thinking about issues related to discrimination, racialization and racism. Girls shared that their school activities did not provide them with such opportunities. For example, during the Girls’ Group Project, a girl described a variety of activities that took place during multiculturalism week in her school. She noted that her teacher read an article to the students which related to racism in schools. When I asked her if the students were given an opportunity to discuss the article and the issue of racism, she stated that the teacher told the class that there would be no discussion as it would likely get out of hand and become inappropriate. The girls’ feedback descriptions of their relationships with teachers revealed the school’s efforts to minimize differences,

Facilitator: "Do you feel connected to your teachers? Like they take an interest in what you're doing?" 
Girl: "Hmm"
Girl: "Not culturally, but academically they do"
Facilitator:: "Not culturally?" 
Girl: "No, because in our school, they don't really separate".
In the following statement, one participant tried to explain the concept of judgement to the other girls,

Let’s say you’ve just gotten married with a different culture and then you try to rent a motel. And then the person says that they aren’t allowed to rent one room here but then he has no sign. So it should be judgement...it’s still a judgement and criticism because the person who is asking doesn’t know why the person is telling that he can’t rent but then there’s no rent sign. So he’s judging you. He’s judging him because he can see that the person outside is his wife from a different culture. So he’s telling him, not directly, but he’s expressing that he’s not allowed to rent.

In her explanation, the participant tried to describe a scenario in which a motel owner refuses to rent a room to an interracial couple. She explained that the refusal to provide service, is based on a judgment based on culture. The participant does not use language such as discrimination; however, her example highlights an understanding about the interconnections between judgement, power and privilege.

Another participant’s story about a religion class that she attended through her community’s temple demonstrated her attention to the complex dynamics of racial oppression. Her class consisted of children of colour, and one day, two boys were fighting. One boy was light skinned and the other darker skinned. She described the efforts by the priest to resolve the conflict by stating that for the day, all the children were green. The children responded with, “okay, light green on one side; dark green on the other”. This story of inter-cultural conflict was useful to sensitize the other girls about the complexities of racism. Another participant shared her own experience with racialization, stating that as a bicultural girl, “the way other people see you is a disadvantage”.

Such as, if you’re eating your own culture food for lunch, and someone comes up and teases that your food sucks, it really made me mad and sad.

During the Girls’ Group Project, we attempted to facilitate discussions related to issues of multiculturalism and racism. We found that when we asked girls directly about
racism in their school environment, discussions came to a halt. In fact, our use of emotionally-loaded terms such as racism created a silence among the group. At the same time, girls participated in the discussion in non-verbal ways, such as through writing and drawing. Through writing, the girls identified several experiences of discrimination and racism. The challenge we experienced as facilitators was assisting girls to connect their individual experiences with broader, systemic issues of racism.

On paper, multiculturalism was described in a variety of ways. For example, one girl perceived multiculturalism by emphasizing differences, “Different language. Different clothing. Different ways of living. Different culture. Different people. I would describe multiculturalism as colours”. Another girl highlighted differences but added the concept of unity, “I think one world with different people. A place where people can....where they are happy and learning different cultures. And in some way, that's all connected”. This concept of unity is further expounded by a girl who not only recognizes differences but highlighted reasons why differences can inform the greater good,

I would say it's like a multicultural tree. Like having all the fruits in the tree. It's like if you have an apple tree, it's just an apple tree, right? But when you have the others to join them, it becomes more useful and it's fun and interesting....you can share with all of them and you can get ideas and that makes it useful.

Another participant commented on the impact of bringing or blending various cultures together,

But to me, it's like a circle where you shade in seven different colours, each stands for a unique culture. When you spin that circle, the colour one will see is white. Meaning all of the different cultures are blended into one, with each nationality experiencing other cultures. Therefore, it means that one belongs in both places.

When she describes the blending of colours and cultures, she highlights that “the colour one will see is white”.
Girls also hinted at the ambiguity they feel towards the reality of multiculturalism. One group participant drew her interpretation of multiculturalism. Explaining her picture, she stated,

A happy face represents where everyone is happy even though there's difference. And then in some ways they're the same because they're all humans, right?

Significantly, she added a stark border around her happy face. The border consisted of question marks, indicating her doubt on the reality of her picture.

These examples demonstrate that the girls' group provided girls of colour with an opportunity to bring up complex issues related to power and race by sharing personal experiences and discussing their own interpretations of the meanings of such experiences. Girls' feedback indicated an awareness and appreciation about this function of the group.

I think it's useful because usually I don't get the chance or think about stuff that relates to culture and race.

These are important issues happening in today's world that should be noticed and talked about.

It kind of made me open up my mind.

An opportunity to be an educator. As panel presenters at a training workshop for social service providers, the girls played the role of teacher, sitting in front of large group of adult learners and sharing their knowledge and experience. Interestingly, two of the four girls had not participated in group discussions during the first sessions they attended of the Girls' Group Project. Each girl talked about an aspect of the girls' group that they enjoyed and then fielded questions from the adult audience. At the end of the training workshop, I asked the girls how it felt to be panel presenters, to be the educators. One girl responded, "it was like we had something important to say, and they wanted to hear it". Another stated, "I was really happy to see all the others and even though I was nervous at first, the people there were nice and were very interested in what "we" had to say. I really
enjoyed that”. The girls’ self-confidence was reinforced by an opportunity to share their experiences, ideas and recommendations about the Girls’ Group Project with an outside audience.

Summary of Significant Features of the Group Process

The Girls’ Group Project demonstrated that group work can be effective in engaging girls of colour by providing opportunities to build peer networks. In addition, group work can provide opportunities to dialogue about issues and topics that are important and relevant to their lives. For the girls participating in this study, this meant thinking critically and talking about their experiences of immigration, their feelings and problems, their understandings of biculturalism, and complex issues related to discrimination. Their interest and engagement in the group was further enhanced because they learned creative tools such as collaging and were offered opportunities to apply their learning to educate others about their experiences of the group process. The role of educator was important to reinforce the girls’ self-perception as active agents, as opposed to subject, in the group process.

Discussions about identity support the findings of Yeh and Huang (1996) that identity is dynamic and ever-shifting. Girls revealed that their identities were in constant negotiation depending on contextual factors such as age, geography and activity. Girls shared that at times they experienced conflicts about their role within their family’s culture and mainstream culture, while at other times they were comfortable with their roles in both cultures. The group sessions were not meant to resolve an identity conflict but rather to provide a space to freely talk about such issues. Group discussions were most interactive when they began with the girls’ own experiences and lives.
Although the girls themselves expressed some uncertainty about the value of groups specifically for girls of colour, a content analysis of their group discussions indicated that their experiences as racialized immigrants provided a common basis of understanding and a starting point for interactive, supportive discussions. Girls tended to minimize the need for participant–facilitator similarity based on culture yet expressed interest in how such similarities could create a group process that was more relevant to their experiences.
CHAPTER V: Discussion

There is an enduring tendency for people of colour to experience the same question many times over, namely “what are you?”. Within this question, there are some basic assumptions that may not be spoken but are clearly understood about Canadian identity and multiculturalism. First of all, the “what” part of the question highlights the implication that for a person of colour, the question of who one is as an individual is less important than what one represents as the “other”. Moreover, implicit in this question is that the person who answers thereby provides an admission to being “other” than white. This desire to categorize misrepresents the dynamic and multiple identities of individuals; moreover, it may lead girls of colour to identify by what they are not, rather than to how they see themselves. Girls in this study demonstrated that their identities embodied multiple definitions of culture related and not limited to language, race, geography and ethnicity. Their identities were always situated and multiple. As one participant stated, “when I’m in Canada, I’m Sri Lankan but when I’m in Sri Lanka, they say I’m Canadian”. Through this study, I have attempted to unify processes of research, practice and action to address the question, “how is a girls’ group model effective in engaging girls of colour?”. I found that group work can address a broader range of girls’ developmental needs by resisting simplistic understandings about the lives and identities of girls of colour and offering a space to speak openly about issues related to race and culture.

Through the process of this study, I refined my understandings about why girls may or may not choose to engage in a group model of practice. In the following discussion, I will link the findings of this study to a structural social work perspective to explain the creation of a group process that addresses issues related to race and cultures with girls of colour. I will focus on how the girls’ participation in the group process can
be impacted by their age, gender, and non-dominant cultural status. Following this, I will focus on the role that adult facilitators can play in the group process, highlighting the value of meaningful relationships. I will conclude by describing the potential of group work based on principles of problem-posing education and participatory action research to facilitate community organizing.

Understanding the Challenges

The primary challenge of this study was to encourage meaningful discussions that were relevant to the lives of girls of colour. This related to countering dominant norms that often prevent girls from voicing their true experiences and needs.

The findings of this study are similar to those found in the literature; they suggest that girls have limited opportunities to discuss how their experiences are impacted by race and culture issues (Handa, 1997; Kelly, 1999). As one girl in this study reported, she had completed worksheets similar to the ones that we introduced in the group sessions; however, the group sessions were the first time she was able to verbally share and discuss her answers with others. Similarly, another girl described her teacher's attempt to address issues related to racism in the classroom by reading an excerpt from a book but restricting any follow-up discussion by students. Both of these examples provided insight as to how difficult issues related to race and culture were being addressed in their lives; that the issues themselves were being acknowledged in some sort of way, yet no room had been provided for critical analysis and influence on individual lives. Discussions about culture were academic, not rooted in experiences. This resonates with hook's observation that the unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained (hooks, 1994, p. 39).
The emphasis on intellectualization was again highlighted by the fact that when the girls were presented with the question: “what is multiculturalism?”, their first instinct was to go to the multitude of “multiculturalism” posters put up across the classroom walls. The concept of multiculturalism in particular seemed to have become mystified as though it was disconnected from their own life experiences.

Structural social work can shed light on why schools tend to address issues of race and culture in the superficial way described by girls in this study. As stated previously, structural social work focuses on how social institutions are structured in ways to support a pattern of domination. Forces such as racism, homophobia and patriarchy have constructed a culture that systematically promotes its self-interest and institutionalizes a myth superiority. In doing this, the dominant culture marginalizes the voices of those who did not fit in and thus contradict the dominant norm. It can be an enormous challenge to call attention to the inequalities inherent in the current system and thereby call into question the validity of the current structure of power. School workers can risk their own social position within the structure by asking questions that destabilize dominant norms. Understanding that it is difficult for schools and staff to address issues related to race and culture, girls of colour may in fact become overwhelmed by asking or answering the difficult questions related to structural inequities.

In this study, we tried to purposefully counter typical ways of addressing race and culture by bringing them out of abstraction and connecting them to girls’ lives. We experienced some apprehension among girls to discuss their experiences related to race or culture which seems reasonable in light of the structural barriers in place to prevent such discussions. Particularly during adolescence, girls are trying to “fit in” the mainstream structure as well as to meet the expectations set forth by their family/culture. They may
experience a conundrum in that they are trying to find a position within a structure that marginalizes them across multiple variables.

Ironically, even Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism may contribute to the structural barriers experienced by girls to initiate discussions about how race and culture impacts their lives. This policy has helped to create a widespread perception that issues of racism have been addressed in Canada despite the fact that many of the values comprising the policy have not necessarily been institutionalized. Because the policy itself exists, it is difficult for individuals to cast doubt or question Canada’s tolerance for diversity by speaking up about their maltreatment. In fact, I assert having a policy of multiculturalism without creating meaningful pathways to institutionalize the policy’s values into society’s institutions has caused girls to create a façade of “fairness” and “equality” in order to make sense of their world. Unfortunately, this coping strategy has occurred at the expense of silencing their personal experiences.

For example, as indicated in the findings, girls provided mixed opinions about the value of cultural similarity among group participants as well as between group participants and adult facilitators. Girls perceived groups based on cultural similarity as “not fair” to the other students. Similarly, girls stated that it is not important that a woman of colour be especially selected to lead the girls group as they are comfortable with people of all backgrounds. Girls provided responses that would not be perceived as unfair, exclusionary or discriminatory by minimizing the benefits of culturally-specific programming. I suggest that these responses demonstrate how the dominant culture’s rhetoric about diversity and multiculturalism can potentially create negative consequences for girls of colour in that attempts to assert the need or the value of programs based on cultural similarity are reframed by the dominant culture as acts of exclusion. I believe that
such overcompensation is a defense mechanism utilized by girls to adapt to the dominant structure which minimizes their needs and voices. The current structure does not recognize the value of culturally specific role models, and it makes sense that girls would provide answers that fit with their existing social reality in which adult experts and leaders are often men and sometimes women but generally individuals who do not look like them. For girls to question the validity of this social reality is a heavy burden to carry, as it requires destabilizing their value system. The value of cultural similarity will be discussed further in the context of meaningful relationships.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the structural barriers to talk about the impact of race and culture on lives, particularly in how these forces interact with each other and serve to marginalize individuals, are very real. A group model of practice that attempts to authentically engage girls of colour must recognize as well as take purposeful actions to address these barriers. The development of meaningful relationships presents a primary strategy to do this.

Meaningful Relationships

I began this study with uncertainty as to whether girls of colour would attend the group sessions, let alone speak about complex issues of culture and identity. However, I learned that girls of colour valued an opportunity to discuss topics that were relevant and important to their experiences which included issues related to culture and race. The group model can be engaging if it is centered around their needs, their experiences and their views. For example, several school staff suggested that Friday afternoons were probably the least popular scheduling time for adolescents' programs due to weekend parties and desires to leave the school grounds early at the end of the week. On the contrary, the consensus in the group was that Friday was ideal and preferred. Many girls of colour who
attended the information session clearly expressed that school-based activities were more accessible to them. In fact, programming during school hours, such as during lunch, was ideal for many. Thus, the group model is most accessible when girls are involved in the planning and identification of needs and when adults discard their preconceived notions about what youth like or do not like.

To understand the value of group work specifically during adolescence, it is helpful to relate the findings of this study with Gilligan and Tatum’s research about female adolescent development. Gilligan found that girls tended to speak in terms of relationship and connectedness and that “identity is defined in the context of relationship” (Gilligan, 1993, p. 160). Tatum’s (1999) research about identity development highlighted that adolescence is a time to build awareness of how race and culture impact youth lives as well as to develop skills to manage the impact of these forces. The findings of my study fit with both Gilligan and Tatum’s: girls responded to a group model of practice because of the opportunity to build new relationships as well as to learn tools for self-exploration.

Group work can be a valuable approach to engage girls of colour in discussions related to race and bicultural status when care is taken to foster relationships. Through discussions of common concerns and experiences, group work practice can facilitate the development of several points of connection among girls of colour. In the Girls' Group Project, the participants’ group experiences were linked by gender, age and immigrant status. The interaction of these and other variables of sameness and difference impacted girls’ relationships with each other as well as with the group facilitators. I found that relationships and critical dialogue are inextricably linked in that dialogue created relationships, while strengthened relationships facilitated deeper dialogue.
Relationships with group facilitators. Feedback from the girls suggested that they receive limited support from “helping” adults, such as school staff, with regard to issues of race and culture. Girls stated that teachers did not seem to pay attention to racial differences nor engage in direct conversation about racism as it related to youth’s lives, but rather addressed such themes in general ways. This parallels Handa’s (1997) finding that South Asian girls are vulnerable to isolation because of ineffectiveness of adult networks of support, including school counsellors and Kelly’s (1999) research with Black girls which showed that girls could not rely on school staff to validate their feelings of marginalization in school curriculum or their experiences of overt racism with peers. One of the primary objectives of the Girls’ Group Project was to provide an opportunity for girls of colour to develop trusting, supportive relationships with adult role models.

Collaborative relationships with adult facilitators played an important role in maintaining girls’ interest in the group sessions. This type of participant-facilitator relationship was previously discussed in relation to Lewis and Ford’s (1991) empowerment study with African-American mothers. These authors highlighted the importance of a non-hierarchical, collaborative participant – facilitator relationship in an ethnic-sensitive model of group work which focused on bicultural status. However, Lewis and Ford were cautious in applying their findings about the effectiveness of such relationships between participants and facilitators to other populations of colour because of the potentially different norms associated with ethnic group membership. In particular, they stated that this strategy may not be effective with Asian/Pacific Islander populations who may be “more comfortable with the facilitator-as-expert role” (1991, p. 19). On the contrary, we found that we were able to foster such relationships with girls of Asian/Pacific Islander descent. I suggest that Lewis and Ford’s emphasis on non-
hierarchical, collaborative participant-facilitator relationship also applies to a culturally appropriate and gender- and age-sensitive model of group work practice with girls of colour.

During and reflecting back over the group sessions, I learned that specific purposeful actions helped me to develop collaborative relationships with the girls. These efforts related to (1) conscious intention, (2) practical application of power sharing, (3) open perspective, (4) honesty, and (5) self-reflection. The development of relationships based on principles of collaboration and power-sharing directly contributed to meaningful discussions among group participants.

First, I found that I needed to maintain a conscious intention to develop a non-hierarchical relationship in order to counter any tendencies to return to the traditional adult role of “expert”. Intention was needed not only to counter my own temptations to “be the teacher” but also to resist efforts by girls to construct me in adult roles that they were more familiar and comfortable with.

Second, I found that I needed to expand my knowledge and skills to truly share power in practical and real ways. I approached my relationships with girls with an understanding that each girl is an active agent in her own life and fully capable of participating with me in a learning process over the course of the group sessions. When we first began the group, we hoped that if we shared our intentions to share power and collaboratively shape the agenda, girls would actively and willingly take some control. We found that stating our intention was necessary but certainly not sufficient. We needed to be patient and think creatively to find baby steps by which girls could explore their new role, make choices, assert power and experience the consequences.
Thirdly, I found that developing collaborative relationship was linked to letting go of my own pre-conceptions about the lives of girls of colour. This meant that I needed to be willing to hear girls’ voices with a fresh and open perspective, trusting how girls of colour described their experiences or identified their needs. This parallels the research of Yeh and Huang (1996) whose study of biculturalism among college students demonstrated that students described their identity and bicultural experiences as dynamic, shifting and multilayered. I found that by letting go of preconceived notions and resisting judgements of girls or their cultures, I could tune into the intricacies of individual experiences and expand the potential of the relationship.

Fourth, I found that collaborative relationships required a willingness to dialogue with and respond to girls with honesty. As Wright (1998) and Tatum (1997) emphasized in their work with youth of colour, girls need honest feedback about the impact of race and culture on social relations and their individual experiences. Adult facilitators of group work with girls of colour require courage to address issues related to conflict, power and privilege, including their own. They must resist the temptation to manipulate truths in order to protect girls. Such “protection” could serve to set girls up for failure, for example by not acknowledging the potential risks and consequences of actions. I found that being truthful strengthened interpersonal relationships as well as girls’ critical understanding of their world.

Finally, I found that my commitment to collaborative relationships with girls extended beyond my actions during group sessions to an on-going process of self-reflection. I needed to constantly think about how my own social position impacted the group process and relationships with girls as well as consider how biases or assumptions about age, gender or culture impacted the group process. I found that I needed to
consciously tune into the words I was hearing and revisit those that I was not hearing. For example, in my initial reviews of the group transcriptions, I did not hear some of the references girls made about their experiences. With increased awareness about how my own experiences were impacting what I heard, I was able to tune into how girls communicated in metaphors and examples to describe complex social issues. This parallels Gilligan’s (1995) findings that adult interviewers in her research missed references about race made by girls until they reviewed the transcriptions.

In particular, I found that it was particularly important to reflect on how our differences in and assumptions about age would impact the group process. Youth culture is distinct in many ways, including its language and behaviour norms. Bilides’ (1991) group work with youth demonstrated the importance of tuning into the language used by youth. I found this to be particularly true with difficult social issues such as racism and discrimination in that girls referred to these issues in metaphor and through examples. As facilitators, we needed to restrain from expecting such issues to be named outright but rather learn how to ask questions in ways that elicit information and foster discussion.

The value of intra-group similarity. As highlighted by Bilides’ (1991) group work with bicultural youth, one risk of working in group with girls of colour is that the group may become a microcosm of struggles and prejudices played out in larger social contexts. Girls’ social relations with adult facilitators will be impacted both by their non-dominant status in age, colour and gender. Moreover, their social relations will be impacted by an expectation to discuss highly sensitive topics of culture and race, concepts that are so central to their own sense of self. Their roles and participation in the group will be determined to a large extent by their past experiences in similar contexts such as in the
classrooms as well as their assessment of their expected roles. The findings of this study suggest that intra-group similarity can significantly shape group relationships.

A strength of the Girls' Group Project was the involvement of women as group facilitators. This parallels Lewis and Ford's (1991) finding that gender increased group cohesion and participation of group members. In the Girls' Group Project, sameness in gender was critical to create a sense of shared experience and belonging. It allowed girls to see similarities between their experiences as well as with those of the facilitators, regardless of age, class or cultural backgrounds.

As stated, the girls' responses about the value of cultural similarity were mixed yet also indicated general curiosity about outcomes of such an experience. I propose that the cautious curiosity shown by girls indicates a conscious and subconscious awareness of the value of such similarity yet also an understanding about the risks of acknowledging this value. In this study, the girls shared that all of their teachers were of the White dominant culture, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of students were members of communities of colour. As discussed earlier, the girls' understanding about the risks of acknowledging the value of cultural similarity may cause them to resist group models of practice based on non-dominant cultural status.

Despite girls' ambiguous responses, this study provides preliminary evidence to support the value of cultural similarity between participants and facilitators in a model of practice with girls of colour. In her Understanding Adolescence Study, Gilligan (1995) found that among girls, "for the most part the women they identified as important to them were of the same or similar cultural background" (p. 136). To explain this finding, she suggested that
girls may feel they can speak in the presence of women who are similar to them in race, ethnicity, and class without the burden of shame or the fear of betrayal or misunderstanding, and these women may indeed be those best able to understand girls’ experience. Women who share girls’ cultural or class background may also be best qualified to pass on effective survival strategies or to point out strategies that may not be serving girls well (p. 136).

In this study, I was able to connect with girls in a way that differed from my co-facilitator’s who was White. This connection appeared to be based on a shared understanding that as a female from a non-dominant cultural group, I could “relate” to their experiences. This sense of connection based on cultural similarity contributed to feelings of trust and thus personal disclosures.

Based on this experience, I assert that the participation of women of colour could critically transform the group experience. A woman who, like the girls, is a member of a community of colour may be able to free the group from mainstream expectations about what a conversation about race and culture should look like and encourage the group to begin in a new place. According to Tatum’s research about adolescent identity development, healthy identity relates not only to achieving an internal sense of personal security but also developing the awareness, skills and ability to acknowledge the reality of racism and being able to respond effectively to it. Women of colour can play a pivotal role in helping girls to negotiate this process of development by sharing their own experiences as well as providing a role model. Women of colour can help girls to challenge the rhetoric that restricts girls of colour to truthfully address the complexities embedded in issues of culture, race and identity and to help them find the words that work. Sameness in gender certainly brings a new perspective to analysis; however, similarity across non-dominant cultural status will facilitate yet a more complex narrative regarding the intersections of diversity.
Working within and across differences. Despite similarity in non-dominant cultural status, my relationships with the girls required an on-going analysis as to how my own social position impacted the process of the group. As a woman of colour myself, I shared with the girls in the group a common lens of gender, race and culture. At the same time, I was continually challenged to consider how my own experiences related to gender, race and culture as an adolescent was not only similar to but also very different from the girls'. It was necessary to consider how other variables such as geography and class shaped our experiences differently. For example, I was raised in a rural, dominantly white community, which presents a very different context than attending an urban high school whose student body is dominantly of colour. As well, class results in powerful variations in experience as well, with our parents facing very different barriers and pressures with regards to balancing conflicting cultural traditions and economic stability. My family immigrated earlier than the families of the girls in the group, securing professional employment and status. Among the girls from my own cultural background, our differences were rooted in a long history, with my family from a high caste standing and thus having access to education and professional status as well as speaking fluent English prior to immigrating to Canada.

This is consistent with Moreau’s analysis about the value of groups organized on the basis of common status (Mullaly, 1993). As a form of structural social work practice, he highlighted the value of group work that is facilitated by social workers who share status with participants based, for example, on gender, race or class. He stated that similarity, such as non-dominant cultural status, can assist the group facilitator to empathize with participants and encourage members to explore themselves much more. At the same time, he cautioned that the effectiveness of group work as a form of structural
social work practice will be compromised if the social worker projects his or her own life experience on the group participants. Self-reflection is central to countering this potential pitfall. In this study, it was imperative that I remained open to learning how differences and sameness impacted on my relationships with girls.

Working within sameness and across differences is at the heart of a long-term vision for change. Specific to women and girls, Gilligan (1995) states,

> For women to join with girls across these differences, however, requires that they do the work of becoming aware of and responsible for their own power, which often includes race and class privilege. Building on these connections also requires women to actively educate themselves and learn about cultures and class experiences different from their own through research and literature and perhaps most important, by listening to girls...may help increase girls' and women's understanding of each other across race, ethnicity and class, and may interrupt the cycle of disconnections that continues in a society so highly stratified by these dimensions (p. 136).

I identified several actions that will contribute to collaborative relationships with girls. With conscious intention to resist the role of expert, efforts to share power in real ways, an open and flexible perspective, a willingness to be truthful and a commitment to self-awareness, all adults can and must become allies to girls of colour. At the same time, our personal moments of growth as facilitators does little to change the message that is reinforced every time girls do not visually see representations of themselves in leadership rules, namely that girls and women of colour do not have power. A significant message about the worth and ability of girls of colour is sent when they are given opportunities to learn with and from women mentors who are members of their own cultural communities.

Towards Community Organizing

In Mullaly's (1993) description of structural social work practice, dialogical relationships are the central medium to carry out consciousness-raising activities that lay the foundation for community organizing. The findings of this study demonstrated that
group work with girls facilitated the development of dialogical relationships, thereby highlighting the potential of the model to engage girls in other activities related to consciousness-raising and community organizing.

Mullaly identified two elements of consciousness-raising, namely reflection in order to understand dehumanizing social structures and action aimed at altering such structures. Furthermore, he described three activities of consciousness-raising that can be carried out through dialogical relationships. These include normalization, collectivization, and reframing. The findings of this study provided preliminary evidence that these activities were beginning to take shape in the Girls’ Group Project.

Normalization assists individuals to see that their problems or situations are not unique. In this study, normalization occurred in each group session. For example, when we talked about bicultural identity, I described experiences from my youth that were similar to experiences that the girls spoke about, and girls themselves shared narratives that echoed each other’s stories. In addition, we referred to existing literature about girls in Canada and read narratives about their bicultural experiences. These activities assisted girls in understanding that their experiences or feelings related to bicultural status or immigration process were not unique. Moreover, these activities were important to assist girls to understand that personal problems or conflicts, such as feeling self-conscious or bullied about the types of food they eat or clothing they wear, are not the result of individual inadequacies or pathology. This new understanding helped to reduce guilt and increase self-esteem. Collaborative discussions helped girls realize that others are in the same situation and assisted them to begin to frame their individual experiences into a broader context. The capacity of the group to facilitate normalization activities was enhanced by the fact that group membership was based on non-dominant cultural status;
girls could learn how girls from the same social grouping experienced the same problems and that, in their situation, it is not unusual to have such problems.

This study also demonstrated that group work can contribute to consciousness-raising by facilitating activities that create a sense of collectivization. Collectivization refers to the development of an awareness of the extent to which their experiences and problems are widely shared. Like normalization, collectivization helps girls to understand how their experiences are similar to those of other girls. Over time, collectivization can help girls to learn how widespread their shared experiences extend and assist them to mobilize collective action. While the findings from the Girls' Group Project did not demonstrate how girls might mobilize collective action, they did highlight that girls valued the group sessions because of the opportunity to develop a mutual aid network, that is to engage in collectivization. The group sessions assisted girls to connect with others who live in similar situations and contributed to a sense of belonging. The findings suggested that features of collectivization were emerging through relationship between girls and over time, the groups would have created the space to identify shared needs.

In addition to normalization and collectivization, Mullaly identified redefining as a consciousness-raising activity: “Personal troubles are redefined in political terms; exposing objective material conditions and subjective personal experiences” (1993, p. 170). The findings of this study indicated that girls did not engage in extensive redefining activities during the group sessions. We attempted to critically examine the concept of multiculturalism by asking questions and exploring cognitive dissonance about what they learned about multiculturalism as a policy and how they experienced multiculturalism in their lives. Reframing creates an alternative social reality, which as described in an earlier discussion, requires destabilizing the dominant view of social relations.
While the Girls’ Group Project did not facilitate each of the consciousness-raising activities identified by Mullaly, over several weeks, girls began to trust the group process and cautiously participate in activities related to normalization and collectivization. As the Project came to an end and circumstances prevented me from continuing to pursue dialogical relationships with the girls, I was not able to see how the process could unfold. At the same time, I believe that this study clearly demonstrated how group work can lay the building blocks necessary to facilitate consciousness-raising with girls of colour. Such a process takes time, more time than offered by this study, so that activities can build on each other and be internalized by girls in ways that create a sense of community.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This thesis was used for multiple purposes: to learn about the lives of girls of colour in Vancouver, to evaluate group practice with girls, and to attain greater understanding about my own experience and identity as a woman of colour. I have provided a complete description of how I designed and implemented a culturally-competent group program for girls. I detailed my efforts to thoughtfully tie issues of race and culture to each component of the group program, including facilitation, structure, content and procedures. Yet ultimately, the thesis was an experiment in praxis, that is to see theory in action and use education for social change. To this end, it demonstrated how structural social work theory can be applied to practice and how group work can contribute to community building.

Group work has significant implications for practice, particularly for social workers committed to structural social work practice. For the structural social worker, the focus is not on introspective behavior change but rather on encouraging people to gain insights into their circumstances with a view to change them. The Girls’ Group Project
demonstrated the value of group work for social workers to engage with girls of colour in ways that focus on individual experiences as well as assist girls to organize around shared needs. Within this model of practice, the commitment and skills of the social worker to create dialogical relationships with girls is paramount. The social worker must be willing to actively resist stereotyped understandings about youth culture, view girls as equal participants regardless of differences in age, gender, race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class or ability, and negotiate group dynamics to ensure oppressive social relations are not replicated. Moreover, this model of practice demands that the social worker partake in activities that advocate for girls of colour, such as advocating for the development and sustainability of gender-specific programs for youth and increased recruitment of women of colour by Schools of Social Work.

As a methodology, participatory action research offers tremendous potential to the social work practice and research. Too often, front-line practice and intellectualized research are viewed as related but very separate activities. Participatory action research asks social workers to consciously view daily practice as potential research activities. Despite its potential, I learned that use of this methodology does not always come naturally and requires a great deal of self-reflection to apply in meaningful ways. For example, during this study, I experienced a sense of anxiety that the “right” questions would not come up if the girls controlled the structure of the group session. The process of the group sessions reflected this tension between using a participatory action approach and resisting temptations to fall back on traditional, researcher-as-expert approaches. Importantly, the most interactive and revealing sessions were those structured by the girls themselves. The research would have been improved with conscious awareness that pressure to find good answers to the research question can undermine intentions to involve
research participants in meaningful ways. I learned that as a researcher, it requires practice and patience to trust that research participants do know what questions to ask and will be committed to the outcomes if they are involved in the process.

This study was a time-limited exploration into models of practice with girls of colour. With regards to time, I observed an increase in trust through the progression of each group; however, it took the full six sessions to shift the girls' expectations regarding relationships with adults, particularly in a school setting where there are clear expectations about teacher and student roles. Accordingly, despite the tendency to provide short-term intervention, if the intention is to create meaningful relationships with girls, resources for on-going, long-term programming must be secured.

Implications for Future Research

There are still so many voices to be heard and much more to be learned from girls. Research about group work could be taken in many directions, such as further investigation into the impact of cultural similarity between group participants and facilitators, ways to involve girls as facilitators of groups for preteen girls, willingness of boys to engage in culturally specific groups, utility of group work to foster cross-cultural dialogue with mixed participants, or the capacity of long-term programming to facilitate organizing. In addition, further research could focus on how issues of race and culture are silenced within the school system by examining curriculum and speaking with teachers or students. Most importantly, these research activities must resist the temptation to study girls of colour as passive subjects but rather actively involve them in ways that are relevant and meaningful to their experiences. As a methodology, participatory action research is not easy to implement. It asks us as researchers to overturn traditional research
relationships by viewing participants as our collaborators. It means providing opportunities for participants to empower themselves. As stated by Hudak,

"By locating oneself within the margins, one refuses to forget the past and instead keeps it alive in memory. When memory is politicized, the margins come to represent a social location that is on the one hand a place of "deprivation" and on the other hand a particular way of seeing reality whose intent is survival and resistance." (Hudak, 1993, p. 174)

By locating themselves somewhere along the vast Canadian landscape through collaborative dialogue, girls of colour will resist being pushed to the margins, becoming co-creators of a vision for change and our partners in promoting social justice.
Bibliography


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Appendix I: Promotional Flyers
Appendix II: Ice-Breaker Questionnaire
Let me introduce myself...

1. The music that I like the best is:
2. The way that I dress could be described as:
3. I like to spend my free time:
4. My favorite food is:
5. The languages I speak are:
6. I am really good at:
7. My family is made up of:
8. The things I like about my culture are:
9. The things I don't like about my culture are:
10. I have lived in Canada for:
11. I worry about:
12. Is there an adult in your life who you feel is your ally (ie supports you)? If yes, how?
13. I feel most powerful when:
14. I feel safe to tell my secrets to ___________ because:
15. A person I admire is ________________ because:
16. When I see myself, I see:
17. The thing I like the best about myself is:
18. The thing I most want to change about myself is:
19. The thing I want most for myself:
20. I dream that one day, I will:

Girls Group Handout Adapted from Helping Teens Stop Violence, Creighton et al. Adapted by S. Manhas and N. Clark
Appendix III: Project Evaluation Form
Girls' Group Six-Week Evaluation

1. Do you think it's useful to have a space and time to talk about issues related to race, culture, school, etc.? Why or why not?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

2. Was this group fun for you? Why or why not?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

3. Do you think it's a good idea for girls of colour to have a group for themselves? Why or why not?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
4. If something were to happen in your life, is the girls group a place where you would feel safe to share your feelings or get help?

5. What things would you have liked to do if we had more time?

6. What was it like to have two facilitators?

7. Was it useful that they were from two different cultures? Why or why not?
8. Is it important to have a facilitator of the same cultural background as you?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Any other comments about the girls group or the facilitators?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

BRAINSTORMING: Adult Allies

What characteristics make an adult helpful or supportive?

ACTIVITY: Plan your own girls group!

What would it look like?
- What would you need?
- When would it happen (day, time, length of time)?
- Where would it happen?
- What activities would you plan?
- Who would participate?
- Who can help (adult allies)?
- What would you name it?
- What kinds of things would you want to talk about?
- What kind of things would you do?

Thank you for completing this evaluation form!